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Week of January 14, 2008







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WHO WANT IT MORE.



# THIS WEEK

> **NFL PLAYOFFS**

## 10 Hit the road Jags (and Chargers, Giants and Seahawks)

The prize for the winners in the wild-card round: an all-expenses-paid trip to Foxborough, Indianapolis, Dallas or Green Bay, where one of four gifted, hungry, well-rested teams awaits. Enjoy.

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After building a nice career as a No. 2 receiver, Reggie Wayne has emerged as the Colts' go-to guy—the one everyone will be looking at if Indy makes a Super Bowl run. By *Matt Crossman*. Plus, previews of this weekend's games.

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Out-of-nowhere running back Ryan Grant boosts the Pack's chances of surviving in the playoffs—and survival is something he knows all about. By *Dennis Dillon*. Plus, previews.

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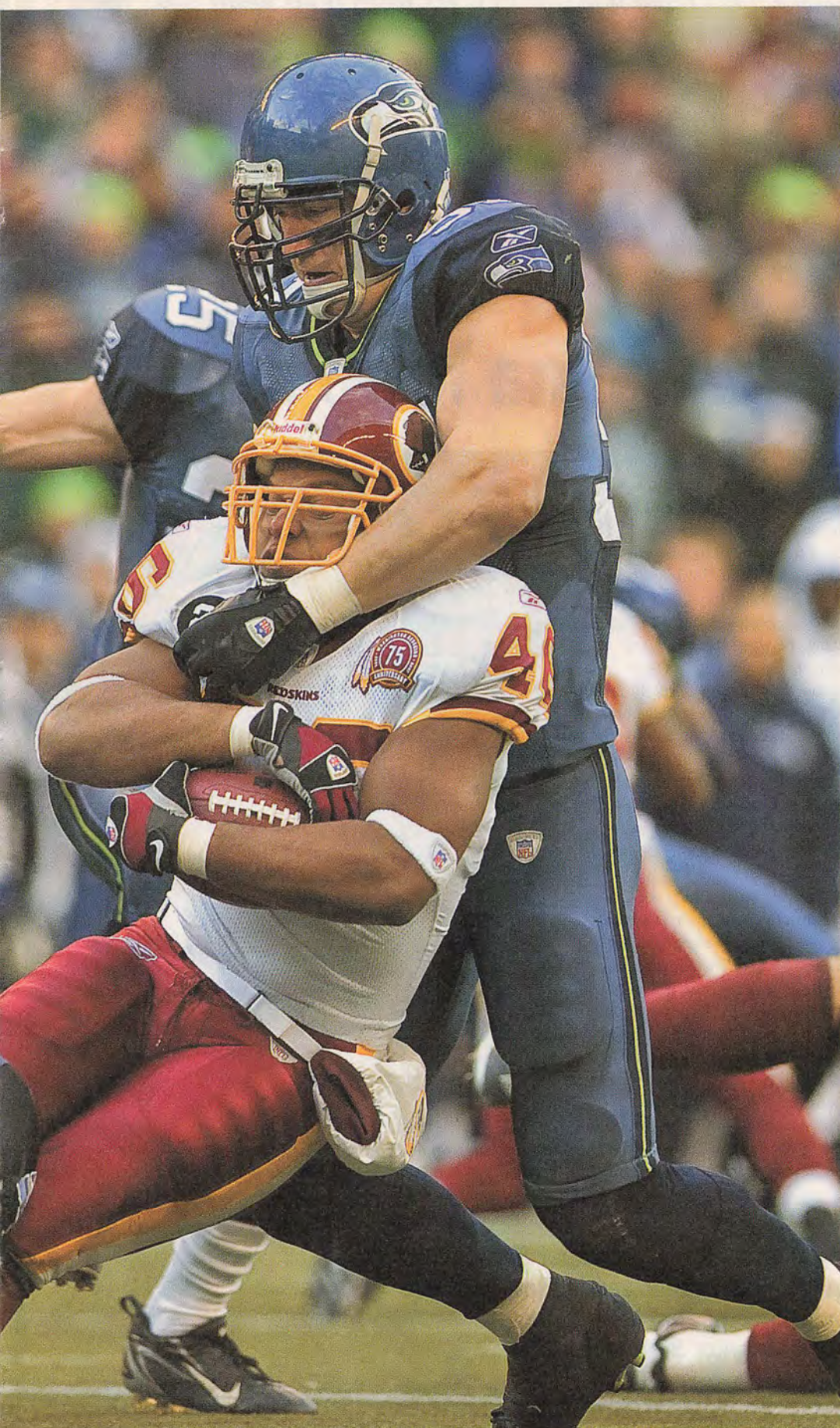
# 19

Patrick Kerney and the Seahawks might not look so tough against the Packers this weekend.



SN / SHAWNS





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# TO KNOW LIST

**6** things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

**1**

THE MAIN EVENT

## 'Boys just wanna have fun

By their fruits—or at least their cahoots—ye shall know them as Tonica.

Tonica, as in Tony Romo and Jessica Simpson. As in a way more scrutinized, if slightly less beautiful, couple than Tom Brady and Gisele What's-her-face. Sportslywood's *it* couple, matter of fact.

As in the single organism that threatens to devour the Super Bowl dreams of the Dallas Cowboys. Perhaps you've heard that Romo and Simpson—along with Simpson's parents and Cowboys tight end Jason Witten—were in Mexico over the weekend devouring flautas and taquitos if not Giants game tape.

If you're a Cowboys fan, that means you can either bury your head in the sand or be subjected all week to deathly serious speculation that Tonica's powers of distraction are too potent for the quarterback to keep a grip on the task at hand. Which happens to be beating the chorizo out of said Giants, who head to Big D sporting a natty 8-1 road record.

That one loss came in Dallas in the season opener, before Romo had been linked to the desirous divorcee. Since then, gossip-mongering yentas, some of them in cowboy hats, have hit the airwaves and the blogosphere to forge a link between Tonica and any imperfection on the part of the 13-3 Cowboys. The strains of angst rose up at Thanksgiving, New Year's Eve and now this week—not to mention after every errant Romo throw—and

resuscitated talk that Romo fumbled away last year's playoff game in Seattle because then-girlfriend Carrie Underwood was in the house.

Even teammate Terrell Owens got in on the act after the Cowboys' loss to the Eagles last month—a game attended by Simpson that was, incidentally, the worst statistical game of Romo's career. "Right now, Jessica Simpson is not a fan favorite in this locker room or in Texas Stadium," Owens told reporters. "I think with everything that has happened, and obviously the way Tony played and the comparisons between her and Carrie Underwood, I think a lot of people feel like she's probably taking his focus away."

All of which crosses the border into the realm of *loco*. Simpson is a babe, but an arm-weakening huddle-wrecker? I really doubt it. Maybe Troy Aikman or Roger Staubach wouldn't have mellowed in Margaritaville at playoff time, but Romo isn't Aikman or Staubach. He's more the fun-loving type, and he plays best when he's feeling loose and, uh, frisky.

No matter: Tonica is a pseudo-scandal with legs that just won't quit. *Que sera, sera.* —Steve Greenberg

**Maybe Troy Aikman or Roger Staubach wouldn't have mellowed in Margaritaville at playoff time, but Tony Romo isn't Aikman or Staubach.**



Romo has fun on and off the field, but Cowboys fans won't be happy if this bombshell blonde ends up blitzing their season.



KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



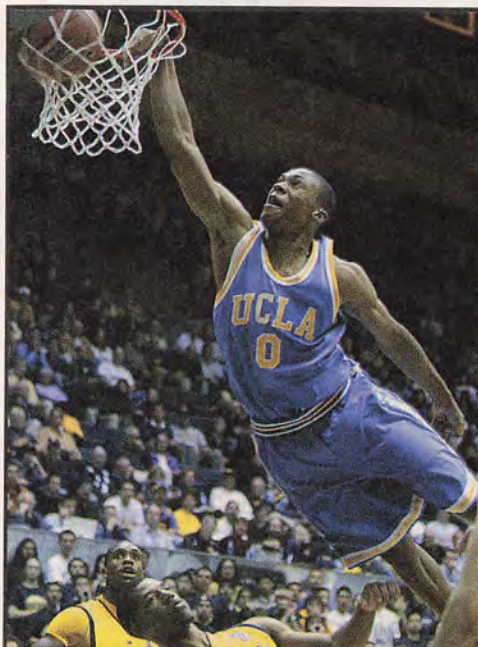


2

IT BEARS REPEATING

'A lot of people have already made their decisions. And that's our country, isn't it? Guilty before innocence—that's the way our country works now. ... You'd think I'd get an inch of respect. An inch.'

—Alleged steroids user Roger Clemens on 60 Minutes



Talent? Athleticism? Russell Westbrook and the Bruins have buckets of it and then some.

3

IN THE SPOTLIGHT:  
COLLEGE BASKETBALL

A sports smorgasbord

Don't tell us why you *can't* do it—just get the job done. And that job is to be something of a tube-surfing superhero on Saturday: a day that features not only large football games in Green Bay and New England but four of the AP's top five college basketball teams on national TV.

We're talking No. 1 North Carolina vs. N.C. State (noon ET, ESPN), No. 4 Washington State at No. 5 UCLA (2:30 p.m., FSN) in a monstrous battle of the Pac-10's top dogs and lights-out No. 3 Kansas at Nebraska (9 p.m., ESPN).

Not that those four teams don't have their weaknesses. They have, after all, combined for a whopping one loss.

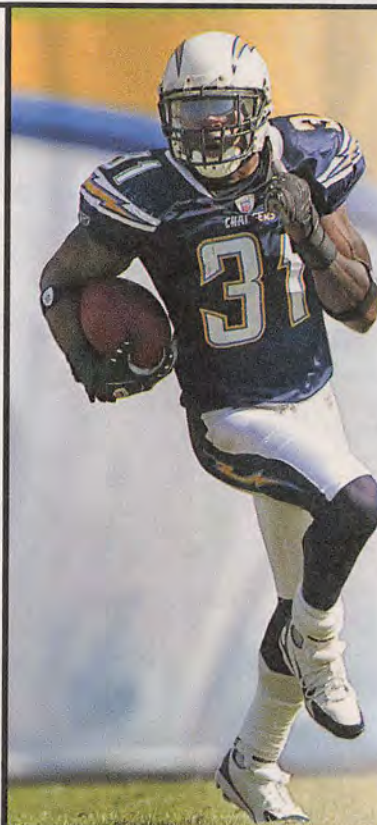
The most enticing game of the three is, naturally, Cougars-Bruins. A gigantic edge in pure talent goes to the home team, but nobody plays harder than Wazzu. A game played in the 50s might never be more fun to watch. —S.G.

4

LIFESTYLES

Money men

Perhaps you don't consider Lenny Dykstra the type who should be giving advice, but the 44-year-old former Phillies and Mets star—who was named in last month's Mitchell Report for receiving steroids—believes he can make a difference in the lives of professional athletes. In partnership with New York's Doubledown Media, Dykstra is launching *The Players Club*, a monthly magazine aimed at helping athletes manage their money. The magazine, which will be circulated to thousands of athletes across all the major sports, is set to debut in April, with Wayne Gretzky and Dykstra's former Mets teammate Ron Darling serving in editorial roles. —S.G.



5

NUMBERS THAT COUNT

10/8

Chargers cornerback **Antonio Cromartie's** regular-season interceptions and starts. The last time a player led the league in interceptions and had more picks than starts was 2001, when Anthony Henry tied for the league lead with 10 interceptions despite starting just two games for the Browns.



6

IT'S A BIRD!  
IT'S A ... GOOSE?

A goose puppet, actually, courtesy of Southern Utah fan Dennis "The Goose Guy" Gregz. For the past five years, Gregz has camped out under the basket with the puppet to distract opposing teams. It works, too—Western Illinois was perfect from the line in the first half at Southern Utah last week; in the second half, while staring down the goose, the team shot 76.5 percent.



# ON DECK

>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports



Aw, Sidney, we love you, too!

## THIS I GOTTA SEE

All times Eastern

### PICK of the WEEK



### SUN 13

The condition you are suffering from is called Couchipitis. It started when you did not get off your duff on Saturday, instead watching the **NFL playoffs** as New England (who, you might have heard, has not lost yet this season) and Green Bay (Brett Favre ... ever heard of him?) played teeth-chattering home games. The condition will get seriously worse today, but at least you won't catch cold by osmosis watching these games: Indy plays in the warm indoors (1 p.m. CBS), and the Cowboys kick off at home (4:30 p.m., FOX).

**SAT 12** In the craziest, most unpredictable college football season ever, do you dare miss the **Hula Bowl** (6 p.m., Versus)? Just because it's absurdly meaningless and you haven't heard of any of the players doesn't mean there won't be cool filler shots of volcanoes.

**MON 14** You know how those ninnies running for president say the same thing over and over again? They do that because they believe you have to hear their—ahem—brilliance over and over again before you'll believe it. Along those same lines, you might have noticed Sidney Crosby getting lot of love in these pages. You *really* need to watch him play—his **Penguins host the Rangers** (7 p.m., Versus).

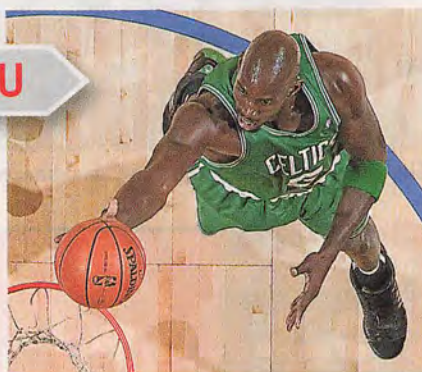
**WED 16** Historically, **Duke vs. Florida State** (7 p.m., ESPN) is one-sided. But lately, the Seminoles have been all over the Blue Devils, having won two straight. Three in a row is unlikely ... but then again, so was two in a row. —Matt Crossman

### COMING AT YOU

In the January 21 issue

**The sizzling Celtics.** Playing with three superstars on the NBA's hottest team is a job that comes with plenty of perks, but it's not always fun and games.

■ We set up the conference championship games as four teams emerge victorious from the divisional round of the NFL playoffs.



The Celtics make winning look easy, but it's only easy sometimes.

### BOB HILLE'S STARTING

# 5

**1 NFL playoffs.** Weather is a huge factor this time of year. It'll be a game-time decision whether to make Al Roker inactive.

**2 The BCS.** It worked perfectly ... if perfect is Sugar Bowl viewers saying, "What's with Tarkenton's hair?"

**3 NFL assistants.** You're a sacrificial lamb when you hear, "Coach wants to see you—and bring your mint jelly."

**4 The Celtics.** They look great, but word is they've been spying on the Knicks for clues on handling employee lawsuits.

**5 Underclassmen.** It's a relief after you declare for the NFL. Finally, you can be as big a money-grubber as your college coach.



## Remember your first true love?

It's time to see her again.

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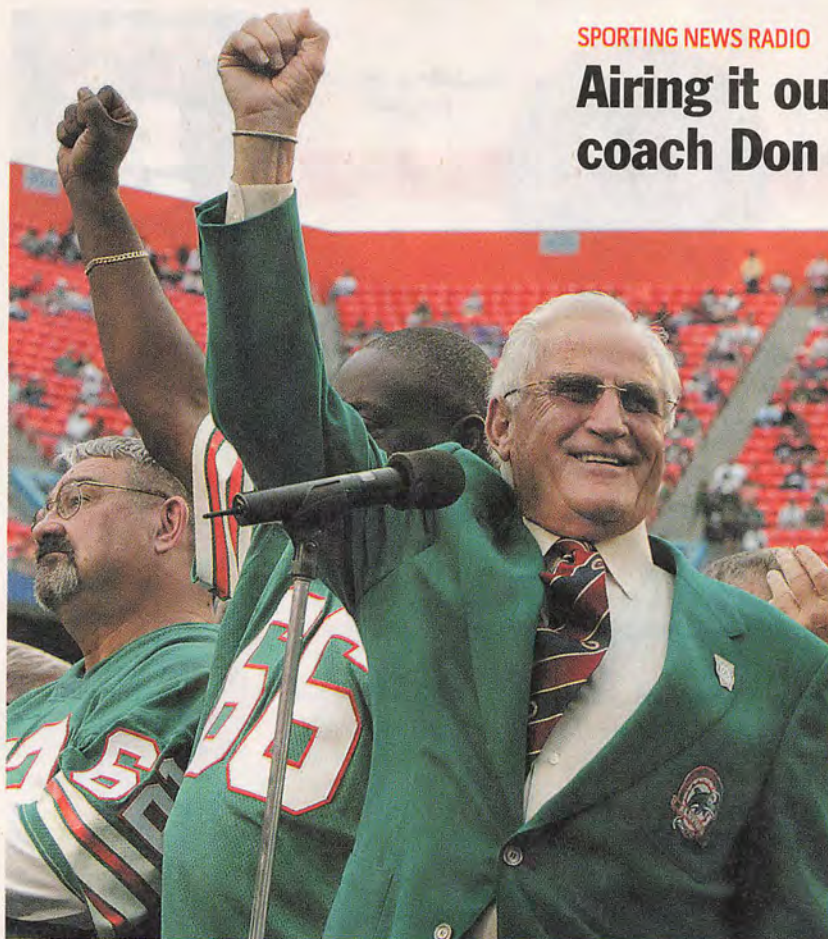
BARRETT-JACKSON FANTASY BID





SPORTING NEWS RADIO

## Airing it out with Hall of Fame coach Don Shula



Sure, it was a rough year, but Shula hasn't jumped off the Dolphins' bandwagon yet.

### On the Dolphins hiring Bill Parcells as vice president of football operations

"I think he's in a great situation. He's coming in with an owner that wants to win and will give him every opportunity to do what he wants to do. They've got the No. 1 draft choice. They could either keep that or trade it and get additional draft choices.

### On Miami's turnaround timeline

"You know, they're coming off a one-win season, and they're a lot better than a one-win season. You've got to think that if they get 'em playing the kind of football they're capable of playing that they can get back (to the playoffs)."

### On the Patriots' unbeaten regular season

"I knew Bill Belichick's dad, and I've known Bill for a long time. He's a great football coach, and Tom Brady is a tremendous quarterback. You've got to admire what they've done up there. They've still got three games to win, but you've got to give them credit for what they've done. A 16-0 regular season is better than anybody's done."

*The Tony Bruno Show* airs weekdays from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. ET on Sporting News Radio.

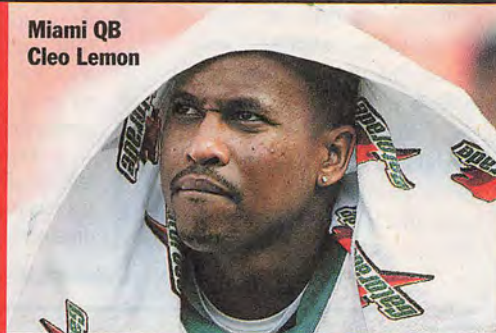


Miami V.P.  
Bill Parcells

## GO TIME The Tuna vs. The Dolphins

By Steve Greenberg

Miami QB  
Cleo Lemon

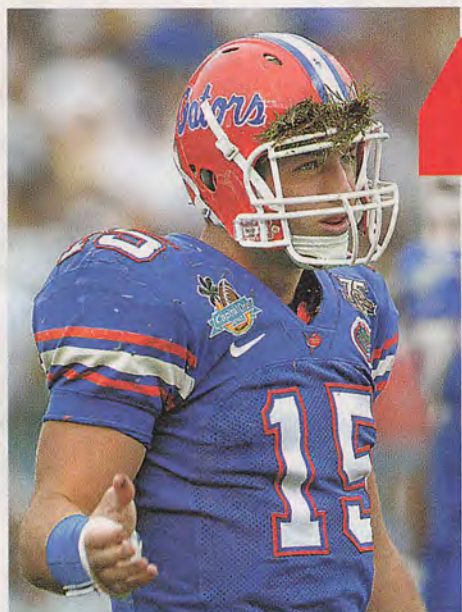


66 (years old) and 172 (victories as a coach)	Numbers that count	1 and stinkin' 15
Winning it all in 1986 and '90	Known best for	Being perfect way back in ... when was that again?
Duane	Otherwise known as	Mud
Revitalizing the Dolphins as head of football operations	Job 1	Forgetting all they've learned about being the worst team in football
86ing coach Cam Cameron and G.M. Randy Mueller	Oh, wait—the real Job 1 was	Ducking
"Did I forget to fire anybody?"	Heard around the hallways	"Anybody have any extra boxes?"
Hand-picking his new coach	What's next?	Who knows? Maybe—that's maybe—winning



# YOUR TURN

>>>>>>>> You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to [yourturn@sportingnews.com](mailto:yourturn@sportingnews.com).



I have adopted a foolproof college football betting strategy: Always take the team with the biggest chip on its shoulder and never bet on the Heisman winner's team.

—Noplayoffs via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

There, there, Tim Tebow—sure, you were upset in the Capital One Bowl, but at least you still have your Heisman.

■ Saying the Hawks are on their way to East dominance (SN, December 24) is very premature, but it does look like that franchise is finally on the right track. Atlanta could be a great NBA market, and it would be huge for the league if the Hawks finally got it together. —*SanAnDynasty* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

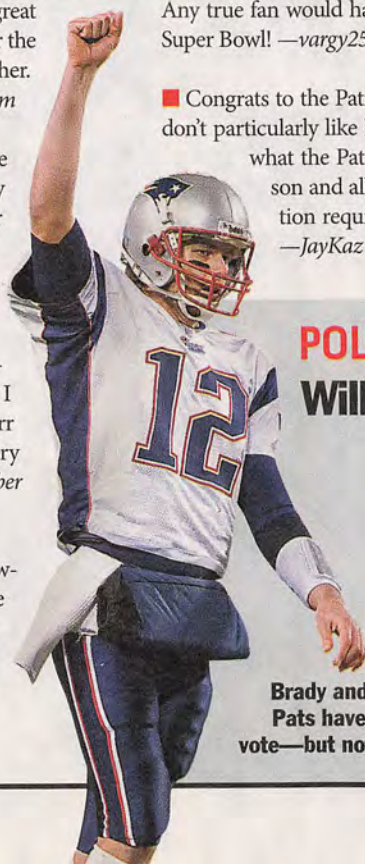
■ The Rays (SN, December 24) are loaded with young talent. If only they could play in another division for one year. —*Bravezrule* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ The Steelers have a way of pumping out playmakers that fill the pass-rushing linebacker role wonderfully. I personally agree with you—LaMarr Woodley (SN, December 24) has a very bright future ahead of him. —*kvnfaber* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ The NHL got it right this time, showcasing its product in an outdoor venue and having its main draw, Sid the Kid, playing in the game. I hope the league does it again. —*buffalocity* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ The NFL could learn from the NHL's outdoor game. Who says no one would show up to the "winter cities" if they played a Super Bowl there? Any true fan would have loved that weather for a Super Bowl! —*vargy252* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)

■ Congrats to the Patriots on their 16-0 season. I don't particularly like New England, but I respect what the Patriots did in the regular season and all the hard work and dedication required to accomplish this feat. —*JayKaz* via [SportingNews.com](http://SportingNews.com)



## POLLING PLACE

Will the Patriots win the Super Bowl?

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STAFF



Brady and the Pats have our vote—but not yours.

## BLOG ON

From your blogs on [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com)

### RE: NOT THE ANSWER

Posted by *IHateMillen*

For Bears fans out there thinking Mike Martz would be a great addition to the team's coaching staff, be warned: If the players aren't in place, hiring Martz as your offensive coordinator is kind of like putting a Band-Aid over cancer—it ain't gonna work. Learn from the Lions' mistake and let Martz go somewhere his offense will work.

### RE: A STEP FORWARD

Posted by *ferociousjane*

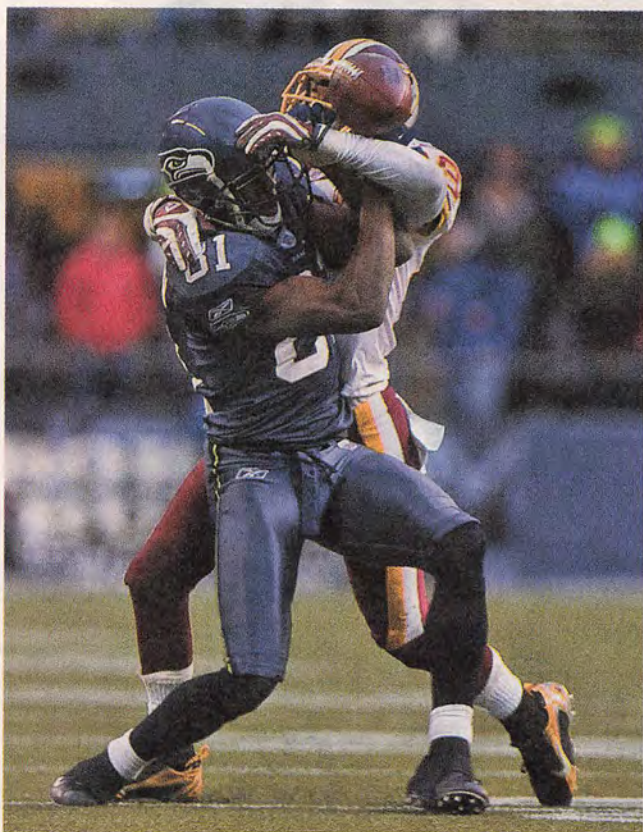
There is much to be decided for the Browns, but finally the faithful can sit back and reflect on a season of positives and a season of winning. I'd even go so far as to say that it's not so bad missing out on the consolatory high draft picks.

### RE: A-C-STINK

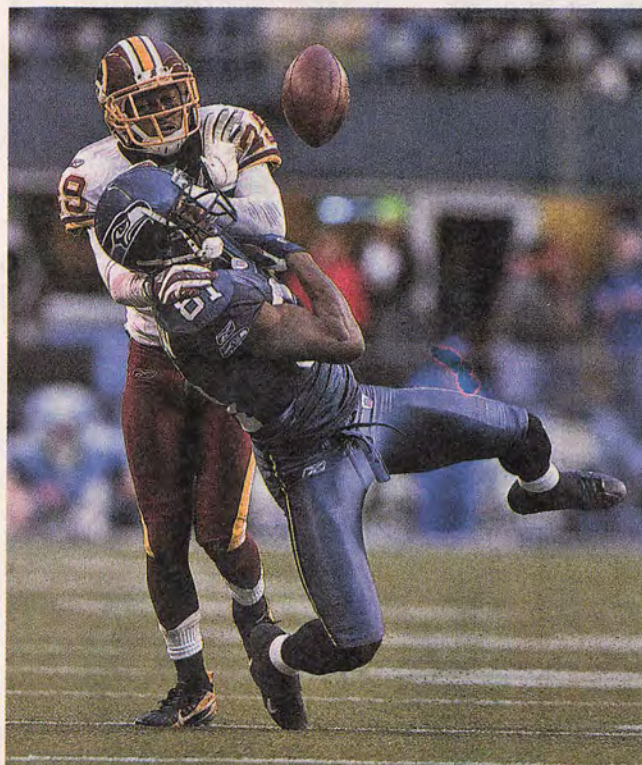
Posted by *backell*

Prior to the start of bowl season, most fans felt the ACC was the weakest of the BCS conferences, and now it's been established. Its second-best team beat the eighth-place Big Ten team by a field goal. The only other victory was a strong Wake Forest win over Connecticut.





Washington's Leigh Torrence appeared to have broken up this pass. Instead, the ball wound up in the arms of Nate Burleson in a wild-card game Seattle won, 35-14.



Photos by Jay Drowns

# Tell them

## This weekend's schedule

*All times Eastern*

### SATURDAY

Seattle at Green Bay, 4:30 p.m. (FOX)

Jacksonville at New England, 8 p.m. (CBS)

### SUNDAY

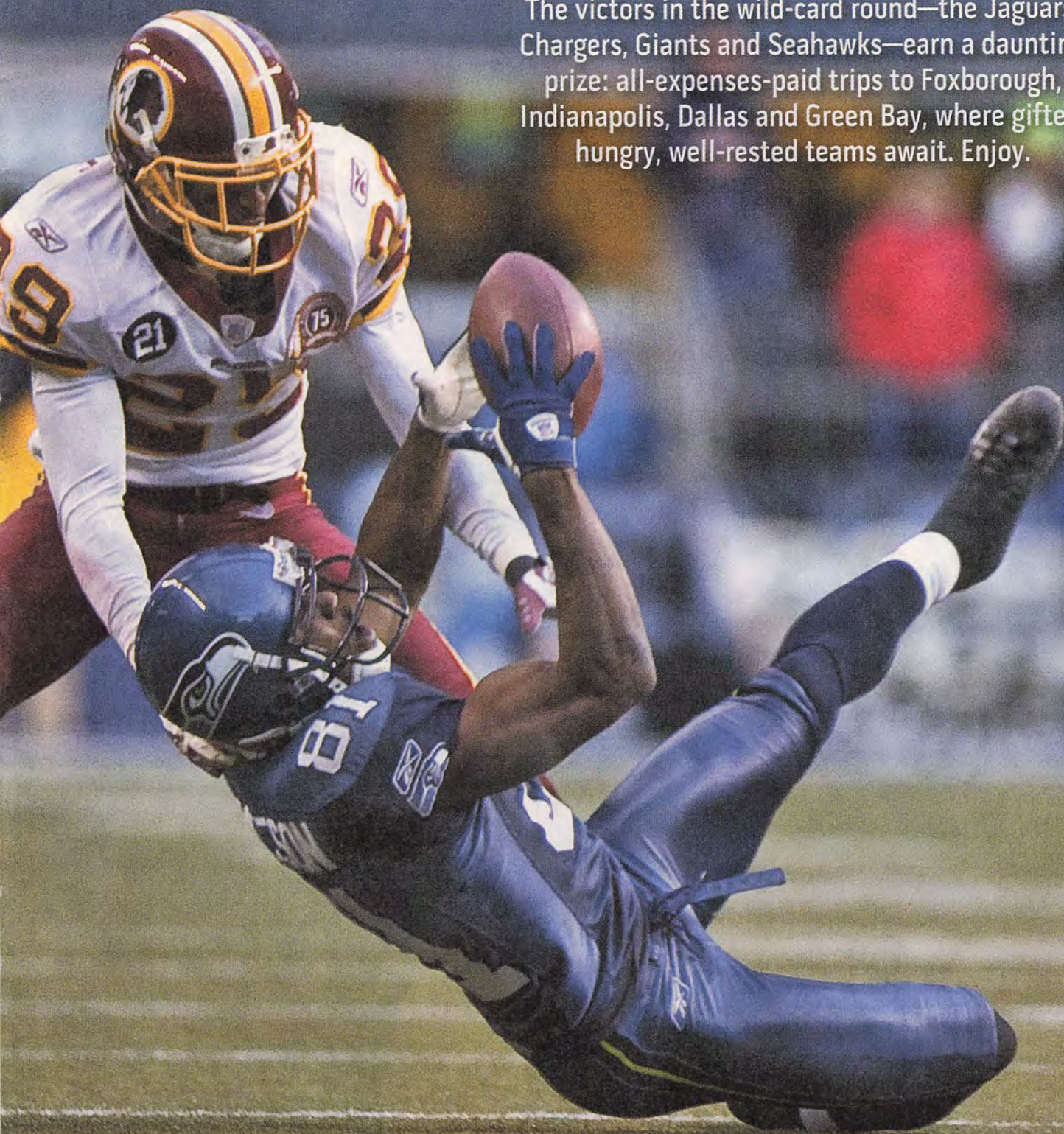
San Diego at Indianapolis, 1 p.m. (CBS)

N.Y. Giants at Dallas, 4:30 p.m. (FOX)



# what they've won!

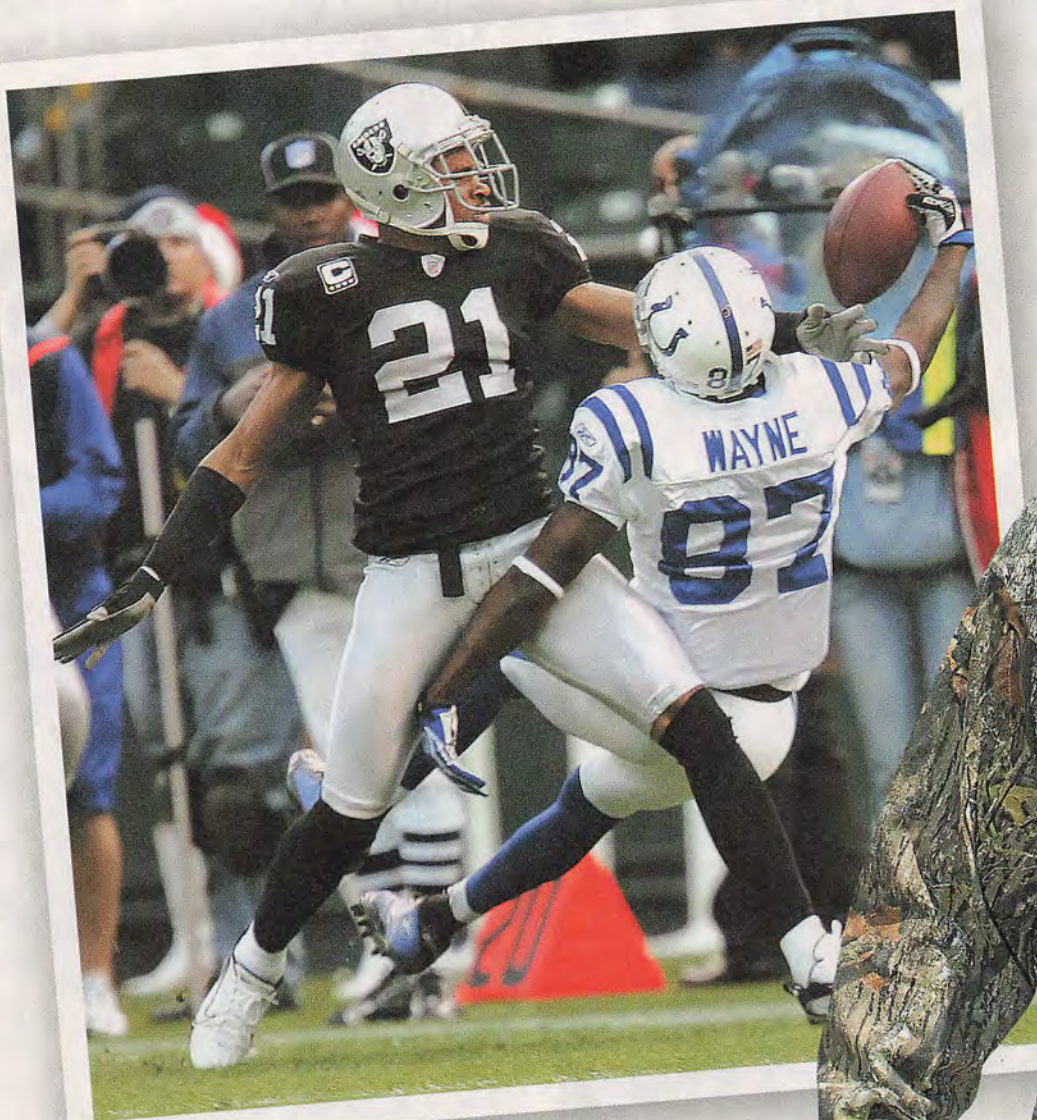
The victors in the wild-card round—the Jaguars, Chargers, Giants and Seahawks—earn a daunting prize: all-expenses-paid trips to Foxborough, Indianapolis, Dallas and Green Bay, where gifted, hungry, well-rested teams await. Enjoy.





After building a nice career as a No. 2 receiver, **REGGIE WAYNE** has emerged as the Colts' go-to guy—the one everyone will be looking at if Indy makes a Super Bowl run *By Matt Crossman*

# Out



Wayne made a statement by wearing camouflage, but it's tough for a guy to blend in when he routinely turns in eye-popping catches, like this grab against the Raiders.





# of hiding



To fully appreciate the catch Colts wide receiver Reggie Wayne made along the sideline against the Raiders in Week 15, you have to watch it multiple times from multiple views. Each one makes the catch seem more remarkable.

FROM PEYTON MANNING'S VIEW, Wayne was sprinting down the left sideline on a key third down in the fourth quarter. Manning has the confidence to throw to Wayne even when he's not open—and he wasn't remotely open on this play. Nnamdi Asomugha, one of the best cover corners in the game, shadowed Wayne as Manning roped the ball toward both of them. So thorough was Asomugha's coverage that Wayne seemed hidden.

Which is oh-so-fitting.

Wayne showed up for the first day of training camp this season wearing camouflage head to toe. He did it, he says, because opponents would be hunting for the Colts, the defending Super Bowl champions. "We're not going to run, but we're going to hide and get you before you get us," he says.

As it turns out, the Patriots have become the hunted, and the Colts—authors of the quietest title-defending 13-3 season in NFL history—are hunters as the playoffs enter the second weekend. But the camo fits for a different reason. Wayne is a master of disguise, whether he's hiding the route he's running or hiding the fact the ball is on its way. In fact, for much of Wayne's seven-year career, his greatness has been cloaked in shadows because there was so much greatness around him. Manning, wide receiver Marvin Harrison, defensive end Dwight Freeney and, as of recently, safety Bob Sanders drew most of the attention.

That's how Wayne likes it—and he points to a "Silent Assassin" tattoo as proof. But there has

been nothing silent about his game this season. He might as well have been wearing hunter orange. With Harrison out since October 22 with a knee injury, defenses keyed on Wayne down the stretch, but it didn't matter. He led the NFL in receiving yards and just completed his first 100-catch season. "For seven or eight, 10 weeks now, defenses have said, 'We've got to stop this guy,'" Colts coach Tony Dungy says.

They haven't been able to.

FROM ASOMUGHA'S POINT OF VIEW, the catch had to be seen—make that seen again—to be believed. "I didn't even know he had the ball until I looked down and saw it in his hands," he says. "I couldn't believe he came down with that. I had to watch it on the replay screen to see how he managed to catch a ball I thought was going out of bounds."

Raiders coach Lane Kiffin couldn't believe it, either. Literally.

"He didn't make the catch," Kiffin told reporters. Kiffin argued that Wayne did not have control of the ball before he bounced out of bounds. But Kiffin did not ask officials to review the play, and replays show the call would've been upheld.

FROM DUNGY'S POINT OF VIEW, Wayne's catch reminded him of when he took over the Colts before the 2002 season. One of the first things he noticed about his receivers was their determination to catch every pass in practice.

"(Reggie's) best attribute is he can get jostled around and still catch the ball," Dungy says. "He's going to catch any ball in his radius. He's got a big

strike zone. Balls that are off-target, he's got strong enough hands to catch them."

Wayne's specialty is what the Colts refer to as "the back shoulder." If he is tightly covered by a defensive back who isn't looking, Manning intentionally underthrows the ball to his receiver's back shoulder. Wayne estimates 30 percent of his touchdowns come on that type of throw and that he catches eight of every 10 balls thrown to his back shoulder. And it's not an easy catch to make. Only Manning knows when he's going to make that throw, and he doesn't decide until the last instant, based on coverage. Wayne has little time to react, but he makes up for that with his ability to contort himself and snag balls out of midair.

"There's a couple of guys in the league who make circus catch after circus catch," says Brian Baldinger, an analyst for FOX and the NFL Network. "And Reggie Wayne is one of those guys."

Randy Cross, who called the Colts-Raiders game for CBS, marvels at a play in that game in which Wayne was running full speed across the middle and snatched a ball right off the defender's body. Another example of Wayne's ability to make the back-shoulder catch came in Week 16 against Houston. On first-and-goal from the 7, Wayne ran to the goal line and cut right. He twisted his body and caught the ball with one hand at his right hip, even though he thought the pass would be toward the pylon. After the catch, his body realigned, Wayne looked thoroughly unimpressed. That was not his first hunt.

Wayne, 29, still thinks of himself as hiding in the weeds. "There's always people questioning my



talent, saying a lot of the stuff I'm getting is because of Marv," he says. "My whole thing was, 'OK, this is my opportunity to show everybody I can handle this.' I don't say much. Just sit back, wait for the perfect time to strike."

The Chargers, Indy's opponent this weekend, will make intriguing prey. San Diego has won seven straight, including its playoff opener against the Titans last weekend. The Chargers beat the Colts in the regular season, largely because they intercepted Manning six times. The matchup of Chargers interception machine Antonio Cromartie against Wayne could decide the outcome of the game.

The Colts hope to have back Harrison, who would bring the team big-game experience and an intimate knowledge of the system. His mere pres-

ence would give the offense a boost, but Wayne still would be the go-to guy.

Wayne's breakthrough started last season, when he made his first Pro Bowl and caught a touchdown pass in Super Bowl 41. He didn't exactly take over for Harrison as the No. 1 option, but Wayne certainly wasn't No. 2 any longer.

Though spectacular catches land Wayne on highlight reels, his total game makes him a star. He recognizes coverages, has a stellar head fake and picks up yards after the catch. Plus, he makes the first 10 yards of all of his routes look the same, which means cornerbacks can't cheat against him.

"He is your total package," says Titans cornerback Cortland Finnegan. "I don't know if there are any weaknesses to his game. I would rate him an 'A.'"

**FROM TIGHT END DALLAS CLARK'S POINT OF VIEW**, the catch against Oakland was Wayne's best all season—and that's saying a lot. "All those great catches you see on Sunday, we seem them every Wednesday through Friday," Clark says. "When I was first here, it was like, 'Man, how'd he do that?' Now it's just what he does."

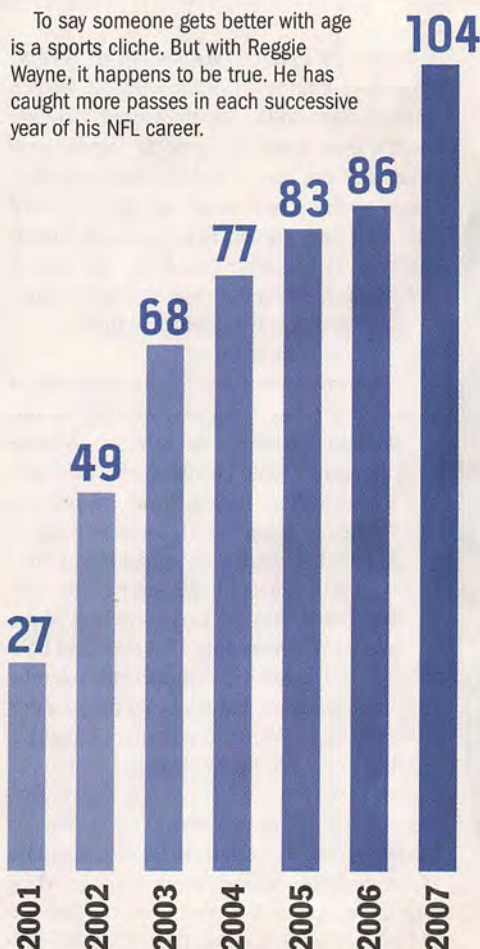
Clark admires Wayne not just because he's immensely talented but also because he is a willing blocker and isn't afraid to take a hit, even when the pass isn't important. Against Tennessee in the regular-season finale, he caught a pass across the middle from Jim Sorgi—*Who?* Exactly!—and immediately got run over by a beer truck. But Wayne held on to the ball.



Wayne gets glory for catching the ball, but Clark also admires his blocking and toughness.

## Outdoing himself

To say someone gets better with age is a sports cliché. But with Reggie Wayne, it happens to be true. He has caught more passes in each successive year of his NFL career.



Will the Colts and Pats win this weekend to set up Super Bowl 41½? Our experts will break down the AFC title game—Colts vs. Pats or otherwise—and you can follow the action with our live scoreboard and blogs at [sportingnews.com/nfl](http://sportingnews.com/nfl).



As the pass against the Raiders approached, Wayne jumped, spun and threw up his right hand, a periscope with fingers. The ball smushed into it and stuck—even as Wayne landed hard, inches from being out of bounds.

FROM WAYNE'S POINT OF VIEW, it was a nice catch, but he likes one from last season against Philadelphia better. Running full speed, he threw one hand at the ball—his left hand, mind you—and cradled it in. He still had to get both feet down, and he did so by tapping his back foot like a ballet dancer as he tumbled to the ground.

That was indeed a great catch. But the catch against the Raiders was better. From most points of view, at least.

'There's a couple of guys in the league who make circus catch after circus catch. Reggie Wayne is one of those guys.'

—Brian Baldinger, NFL analyst

One last bit of camo talk: Wayne is difficult to defend because he hides the fact a pass is coming. Like a hunter who doesn't want to spook his prey by raising his gun too soon, he keeps his hands down even as the ball approaches.

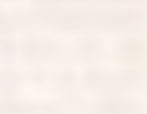
"DBs are taught to react on change," Wayne says. "DBs are also taught to play the hands."

Whenever there's a deep pass and you stick your hands out, your hands and arms are the first thing they're going to swipe at. If I wait until the last second to catch the ball, by the time they react, I already have the ball."

And anybody looking for him should check the end zone. He can't hide there. **SN**

## AFC DIVISIONAL PLAYOFF MATCHUPS

War Room scouts offer their unique take on this week's matchups. For more in-depth analysis, go to [sportingnews.com/nfl](http://sportingnews.com/nfl).

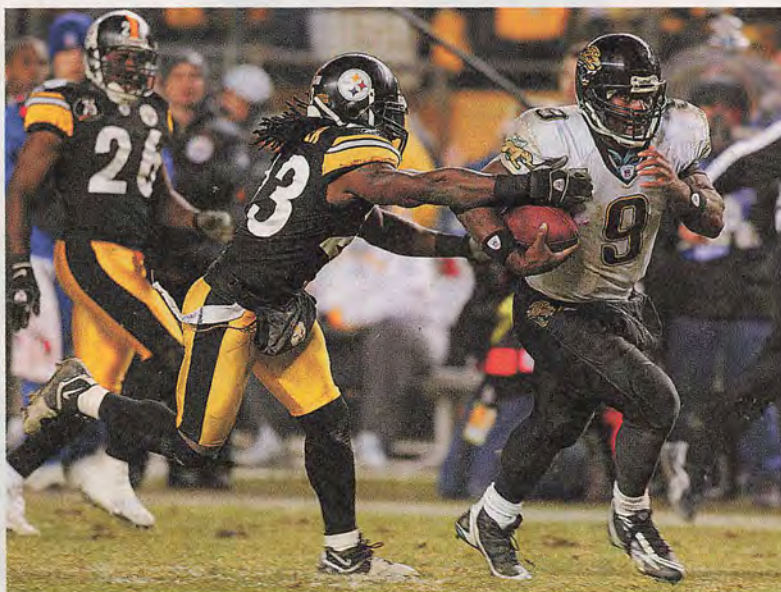


**When Jacksonville has the ball:** Expect the Jaguars to run as many as 40 times, with Maurice Jones-Drew attacking the interior, Fred Taylor using his cutback ability to bounce outside and David Garrard running QB draws on third downs. The Patriots will throw a variety of exotic coverages and blitzes at the efficient Garrard, aimed at getting him to hold the ball longer and make bad throws under pressure. Look for a short, ball-control passing attack and for WR Matt Jones to be a factor on slant and fade routes.

**When New England has the ball:** The Patriots will take what the defense gives them early, with QB Tom Brady throwing checkdowns to TE Benjamin Watson and WRs Wes Welker and Jabar Gaffney. The Jaguars will take a bend-don't-break approach, though CB Rashean Mathis will be in over his head against WR Randy Moss. Mathis is aggressive and will bite hard on Moss' double moves. The Jags can't afford to bring an eighth man in the box, so look for RB Laurence Maroney to have success on draw plays out of passing formations.

**Bottom line:** The Jaguars will struggle to score enough points to keep up with Brady and the high-powered Patriots offense, which will take advantage of Jacksonville's secondary.

**Pick: Patriots 39, Jaguars 10**



The Jaguars will need Garrard to make things happen with his feet and his arm.

**When San Diego has the ball:** The Chargers will have to rely on QB Philip Rivers and the short passing game to set up the run. The Colts will close hard on those short passes to try to limit yards after the catch

from WRs Chris Chambers and Vincent Jackson. Indy will bring SS Bob Sanders into the box to shadow RB LaDainian Tomlinson, so his best chance for making an impact is as a receiver, where he can catch swing passes in the flat and get outside more quickly.

**When Indianapolis has the ball:** The Colts' offense is based almost entirely on the presnap reads of QB Peyton Manning. Now that WR Marvin Harrison is able to complement WR Reggie Wayne, the Chargers can't afford to put eight men in the box, which means Manning will often check to runs by Joseph Addai, especially early in the game. Expect the Colts to force the Chargers into nickel and dime

packages, where their lack of depth will be exploited. Look for TE Dallas Clark and WR Anthony Gonzalez to line up in the slot and find openings over the middle.

**Bottom line:** The Colts have too many weapons for the Chargers to account for—and Rivers and his mates won't keep up.

**Pick: Colts 30, Chargers 14**



Out-of-nowhere running back **RYAN GRANT** boosts the Pack's chances of surviving in the playoffs—and survival is something he knows all about

*By Dennis Dillon*

**H**e's lucky to be here. No, not in the NFL. Not in Green Bay, where he has been working and living since early September. I'm talking about right *here*, right *now*, at a table in the Packers' locker room at Lambeau Field—sitting, breathing, talking ... and recounting the scariest moment in his life.

You think you know the improbable story of Ryan Grant. Acquired from the Giants for an undisclosed draft pick right before the start of the season. Rushed for 929 yards and eight touchdowns after taking over as the Packers' feature back in Week 8. Resuscitated a previously lifeless running game and should give Green Bay's offense balance in the playoffs.

You don't know the half of it.

Grant was in a Manhattan nightclub with some Giants teammates in March 2006 when he got bumped and lost his balance. Reaching back to brace himself from falling, he stuck his left hand through some champagne glasses and his arm started bleeding profusely. He walked out of the club, someone called 911 and medical personnel arrived—just in time.

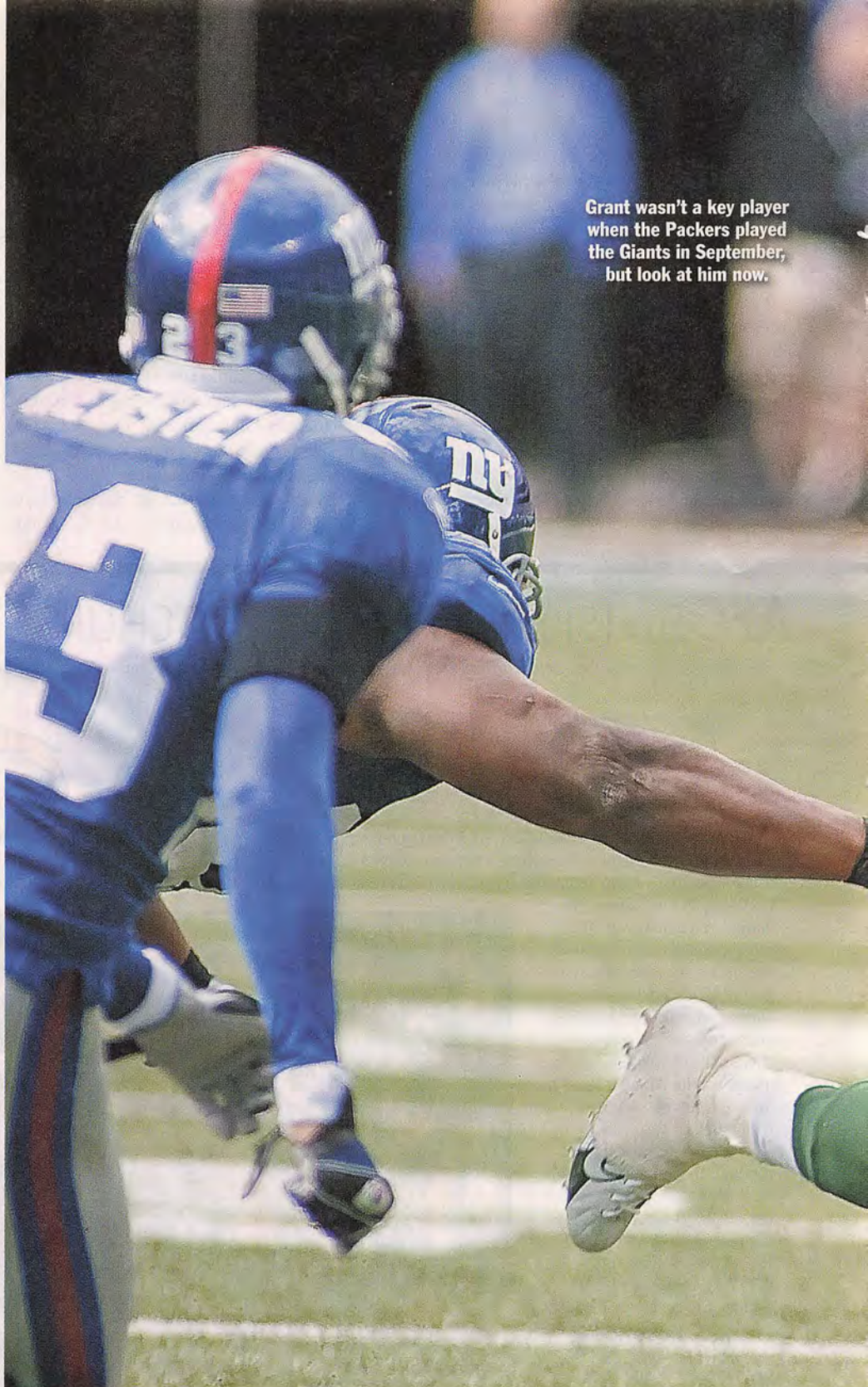
"I didn't know the severity of it initially," says Grant, who could have bled to death.

He severed an artery, the ulna nerve and a tendon in his left arm. Surgery was performed the next morning, and for eight weeks Grant had to wear a cast on his arm that immobilized his hand in an awkwardly bent position to keep pressure off the tendon. After that, he faced an eight-month rehab.

At first, there was some doubt Grant would be able to use his left hand again, much less play football. But by the time the Giants left for training camp in July, he was working out twice a day. Although he was placed on the injured reserve list, which meant he would not play for the second straight year—he was on the Giants' practice squad as an undrafted rookie in 2005—he continued to work out and improve his strength and speed.

Since he didn't have to attend meetings or practice, Grant had some free time. Rather than mope around, he took real estate classes and helped coach the Queen of Peace High School football team in North Arlington, N.J.

Grant wasn't a key player when the Packers played the Giants in September, but look at him now.



# Laying the





JOHN DUNN FOR SN

"I couldn't sit and feel sorry for myself," he says. "I'm not that type of a person."

Nearly two years later, any sympathy should be directed toward the defenses that now have to try to stop Grant.

**T**he Packers' problems at running back this season started on the opening day of training camp, when third-year pro Vernand Morency hurt his knee. Later in camp, another knee injury put Noah Herron, also a third-year player, on I.R. Brandon Jackson, a rookie second-round draft pick, began the season as the No. 1 back but he suffered a shin injury in the third game. In stepped DeShawn Wynn, another rookie. Still following along?

Green Bay won its first four games, but the running attack was abysmal. It wasn't all the runners' fault; the line was trying to develop chemistry and timing with the young backs. After four games, the Packers had the worst rushing offense in the league, averaging 54.3 yards per game and 2.7 yards per carry.

"It was brutal," offensive coordinator Joe Philbin says. "We dug ourselves such a deep ditch that it was going to be hard to get too far out of it."

Grant burrowed into a hole of his own in Week 4

## This is ... Ryan Grant

**Biggest influence on his life:** His family, including his father, mother, brother, uncles, aunts and grandmother. "I was kind of raised in a community," he says.

**Last book he read:** *The Way of the Samurai*.

**Must-see movie when it's on television:** *A Christmas Story*. He watches it at least four times every holiday season.

**Essential items he takes on a football trip:** His toothbrush and playbook.

"Everything else is secondary," he says.

**Celebrity ties:** Grant's brother is the lead vocalist for Game Rebellion, a rap-rock band from Brooklyn.

**About living in Green Bay:** "It's really, really cold. I park my car in a garage at home and I don't go outside often. When I go somewhere, I try to find the closest parking spot."

**If he didn't play football:** He would be in real estate or finance.

# groundwork



against the Vikings. After playing the role of backup special teams player, he fumbled on his sixth carry of the season, nearly costing the Packers a victory. But when he received another chance four weeks later, during a Monday night game in Denver, he extricated both himself and the ground game.

After Wynn suffered a shoulder injury on his first carry against the Broncos (he went on I.R. the next day), Grant rushed 22 times for 104 yards in a 19-13 overtime victory. At his postgame press conference, coach Mike McCarthy anointed Grant the new starter.

Grant brought new energy to Green Bay's offense, rushing 188 times for 956 yards overall (a 5.1-yard average) even though he was the primary back for fewer than 10 full games. When Seattle goes to Lambeau for an NFC divisional game against the No. 2-seeded Packers on Saturday, the Seahawks won't be able to focus only on Brett Favre and his quintet of wide receivers. The Seahawks have a plan for stopping Grant.

A downhill, one-cut, decisive runner—"Not a real shake-and-wiggle type of player," says Philbin—Grant is physical enough to break tackles and can shift into another gear when he gets in the open. He had 24 regular-season runs of 10 or more yards, including 11 of at least 20 yards—only San Diego's LaDainian Tomlinson (13) and Pittsburgh's Willie Parker (12) had more.

Sitting in his office last week, running backs coach Edgar Bennett pulled up a play on his computer from a Week 16 loss to the Bears that demonstrated how Grant and the line work in tandem. It was a stretch run, a staple in the Packers' running game.

With Green Bay facing second-and-6 at its own 34 late in the second quarter, tight end Bubba Franks went in motion from left to right. Favre handed off to Grant, who started to the right side, forcing one of the Bears' linebackers to overpursue. Grant then cut back inside through a hole created by blocks from right guard Jason Spitz and center Scott Wells. Left guard Daryn Colledge helped by eliminating a Bears lineman with a cut block on the back side. Once he got into the open, Grant raced for a 66-yard touchdown, his longest run of the season.

Before each game, Bennett asks the running backs to write down their individual goals. "Every week, one of the things he writes down is he wants to be the spark of our offense," Bennett says of Grant. "It could be a big block, a great run, finishing a run where he overpowers a 'backer or a DB. Somehow, some way, he finds a way to be a spark and set the tone."

Until this season, Grant never had played in an offense that emphasized zone blocking—not at Don Bosco Prep High School in Ramsey, N.J., nor at Notre Dame, where he finished 11th on the Irish's career rushing list. But it fits him like a pair

of comfortable jeans.

"He's perfect for their scheme," says Vikings safety Darren Sharper, a longtime Packer. "He reminds me of Dorsey Levens (who played 102 games for the Packers from 1994 to 2001). Besides the number (Grant wears No. 25, just like Levens), he's built like him, runs like him. He's a big kid back there who runs the ball pretty forcefully. He can make it a long day for a defense."

Just four teams—Dallas, Green Bay, Washington and Denver—rushed for at least 100 yards against Minnesota's top-ranked run defense (74.1 yards per game) this season. And Grant was the only individual runner to crack 100.

After ranking last in the league in rushing in seven of the first 10 weeks, the Packers climbed out

of their ditch and finished 21st for the season. More respectable, perhaps, but their 99.8-yard average per game was lowest among the 12 teams that made the playoffs. Consistency concerns Philbin most.

"We'd love to keep getting those long runs and have him taking it to the house," Philbin says of Grant. "But we probably still have a few too many 1-yarders and zero-yard runs. We'd like to be more plus 3, plus 3, plus 4, plus 7, plus 3."

**G**rowing up in Rockland County, N.Y., about 20 minutes north of Manhattan, Grant played football, basketball, baseball and soccer and ran track. Asked how he developed his running style, he smiles and says, "My father put me through a lot of



## Freshness counts

The fresher Ryan Grant is, the more effective he is. According to STATS LLC, Grant is clearly most productive during his first 10 carries in a game.

Carries	Att.	Yards	Avg.	Long	TDs	10+ runs
1-5	56	422	7.5	62	4	12
6-10	46	231	5.0	66	2	4
11-15	43	152	3.5	27	2	3
16-20	27	87	3.2	17	0	3
21-25	12	29	2.4	13	0	1
26-30	4	35	8.8	26	0	1

**In cold Chicago, Grant had the hot hand, reeling off a 66-yard TD run.**



extra workouts. My father was a workout fanatic."

Vincent Grant began directing his son through various running drills when Ryan was 9. By the time he was 15, Ryan was running up old ski slopes in upstate New York, off the Palisades Parkway. Eventually, his father stopped orchestrating the workouts because Ryan initiated them himself.

When Grant was in junior high school, his cousin compiled a videotape for him featuring such NFL stars as Gale Sayers, Walter Payton, Eric Dickerson, Barry Sanders and Emmitt Smith. It included clips of great plays, the players' workout routines and various commentary. Watching it, Grant says he learned patience, vision and angles—key attributes for any running back. The tape originally was three hours long, but Grant has added to it over the years.

He calls it his "Running Back Bible"—and it contains clips of Ahman Green, the man whose job Grant eventually filled in Green Bay.

You could make a case that Grant and Philbin being together in Green Bay is serendipitous. Or ironic. When Grant came out of high school, Philbin, then an assistant coach at the University of Iowa, tried to recruit him. But Grant gave him a cold shoulder.

"He blew me off. He barely gave me the time of day," Philbin says playfully. "I told him paybacks are tough."

Even though Grant didn't play a down in his first two NFL seasons, he was on the radar screen of Green Bay's personnel department this pre-season. In fact, the team sent a scout to each of the

Giants' exhibition games. When injuries diminished their depth at running back, the Packers made a deal for Grant, never imagining he would become Favre's co-star so soon.

So Philbin finally got his man. And Grant finally got a chance to step into the NFL's spotlight. Guess you could say they're both lucky. **SN**



*How important is the ground game in this year's playoffs, given all the star quarterbacks? We tackle that question and rank each of the remaining teams' rushing attacks at [sportingnews.com/nfl/rush](http://sportingnews.com/nfl/rush).*

## NFC DIVISIONAL PLAYOFF MATCHUPS

War Room scouts offer their unique take on this week's matchups. For more in-depth analysis, go to [sportingnews.com/nfl](http://sportingnews.com/nfl).



**When New York has the ball:** Expect RBs Brandon Jacobs and Ahmad Bradshaw to attack the middle of the Dallas defense, setting up play-action and runs to the outside. Bradshaw, who didn't have a carry against the Cowboys this season, is the X-factor with his good burst and ability to make big plays as a receiver out of the backfield. The Giants expect double coverage on WR Plaxico Burress, so QB Eli Manning will have to show great patience and use his checkdown options often.

**When Dallas has the ball:** Look for the Cowboys to attack the edges of the Giants' defense with RB Marion Barber, forcing DEs Michael Strahan, Osi Umenyiora and Justin Tuck to slow their pass rush and emphasize containment. QB Tony Romo does a great job evading pressure and buying time for his receivers, especially TE Jason Witten over the middle. The key, though, is WR Terrell Owens' ankle. If he's out or limited physically, the Giants can drop a safety into the box to support the run defense or bracket Witten.

**Bottom line:** If Owens is healthy, the Cowboys will win. If he's not, the Cowboys will struggle to keep up offensively with the Giants.

**Pick: With a healthy T.O.: Cowboys 24, Giants 14**  
**Without a healthy T.O.: Giants 24, Cowboys 14**



The Giants will use Jacobs' 264 pounds to soften up the middle of Dallas' 'D'.

**When Seattle has the ball:** Look for less of RB Shaun Alexander and more of Maurice Morris, whose quickness and burst to the hole give him a better chance to be productive against the Packers' fast linebackers. The

Seahawks will use a lot of spread formations and short routes to try to negate the Packers' strong pass rush and force them into their dime package. Expect QB Matt Hasselbeck to throw to as many as eight receivers—Morris figures prominently in the passing plans—and try to avoid CBs Al Harris and Charles Woodson.

**When Green Bay has the ball:** The Packers will use RB Ryan Grant to establish the run early, then use play-action to freeze the Seahawks' athletic linebackers and keep their strong pass rush at bay. The Seahawks will rely on their corners to hold up one-on-one, drop a safety into the box and free OLB Julian Peterson as a blitz. QB Brett Favre has speedy big-play receivers in

Greg Jennings, Donald Driver and James Jones, so look for him to take shots deep against favorable coverage.

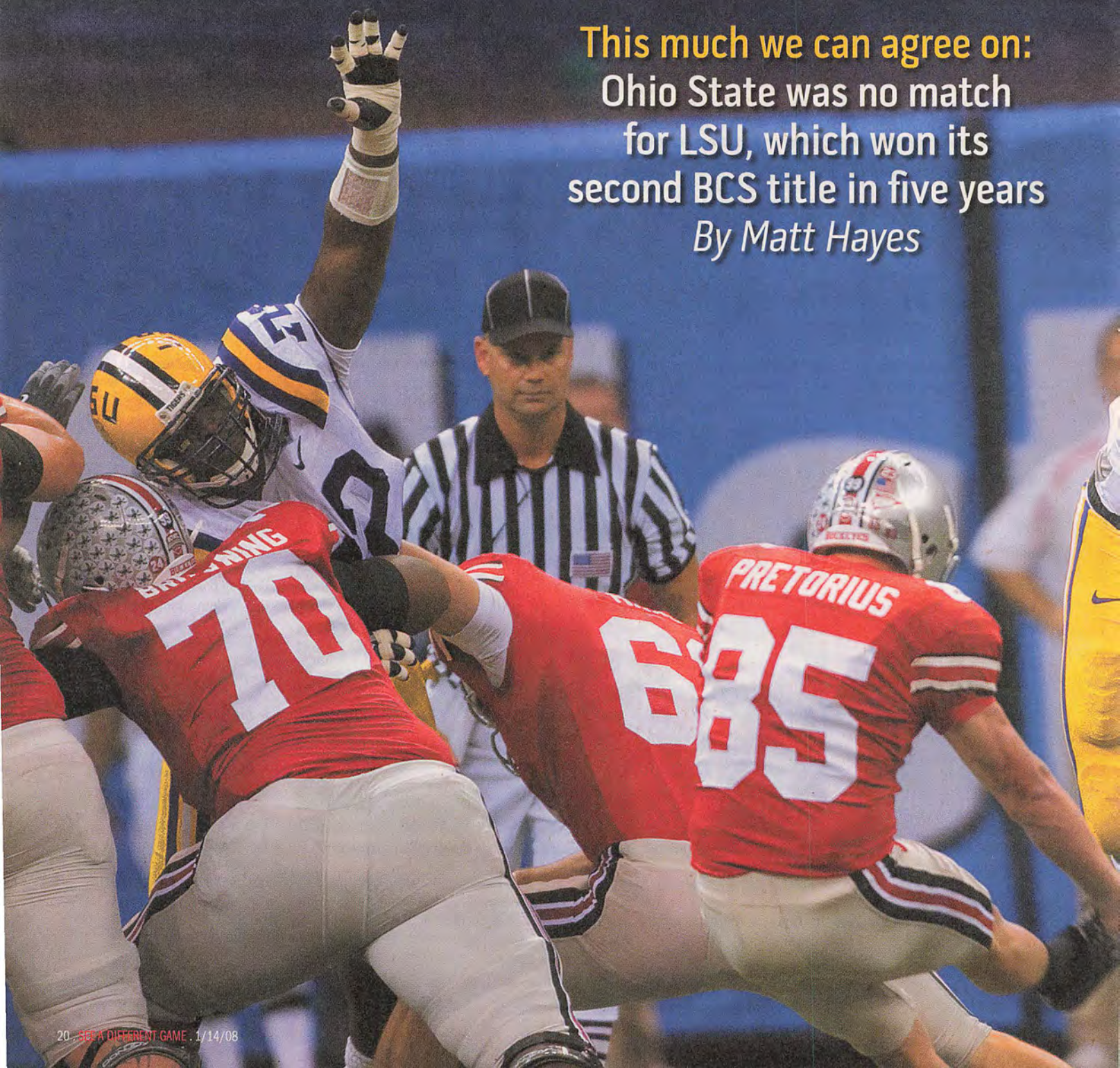
**Bottom line:** Both teams have solid defenses and quarterbacks capable of carrying the offensive load. Give the edge to the Packers, who are at home and coming off a week of rest.

**Pick: Packers 24, Seahawks 21**



# Show of

This much we can agree on:  
Ohio State was no match  
for LSU, which won its  
second BCS title in five years  
*By Matt Hayes*





# hands

Jean-Francois' blocked field goal attempt kept the score tied early, then LSU easily swatted aside the SEC-bitten Buckeyes, 38-24.





**R**ight outside the French Quarter, off the path of loud tourists and the stench of stale beer, is old St. Louis Cemetery No. 1. Weave your way through the historic resting place and come upon the tomb of Marie Laveau, queen of voodoo.

Legend has it locals lay coins, trinkets or flowers at the grave site to bring good luck. A few days before the BCS national title game, purple and gold beads draped the revered monument.

"Luck," says LSU defensive tackle Glenn Dorsey, "doesn't have anything to do with it."

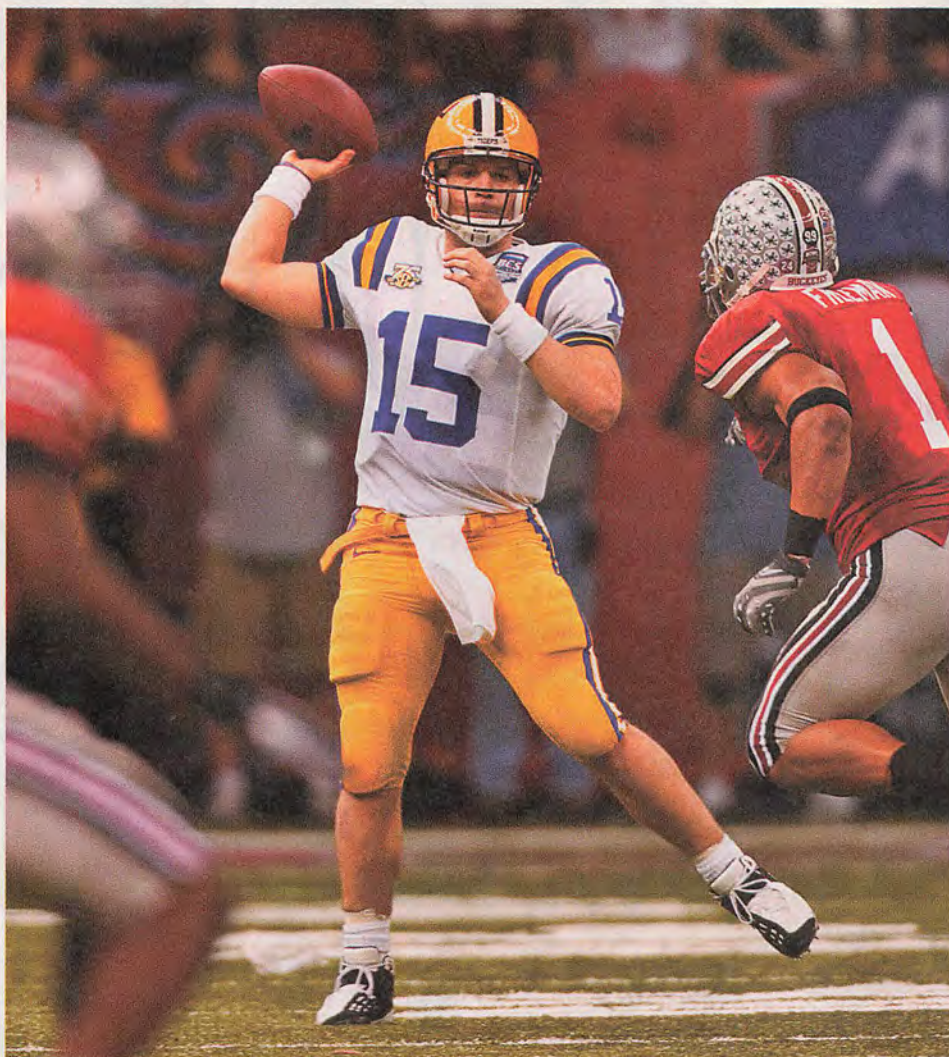
Yeah, well, something was driving this team of destiny. At this point, there's no better explanation for this acid trip of a season. After all the upsets, after the unpredictable and the inconceivable, we're left with this: LSU is your national champion. Got the Waterford Crystal football and the 38-24 win over Ohio State in the BCS national championship game to prove it.

But after a season in which 20 top 10 teams lost to unranked teams, 13 top five teams lost to unranked teams, seven No. 2 teams lost, the top two teams lost on the final week of the season and—deep breath, we're not finished yet—the team that eventually won it all is the best *two-loss* team out there, a sense of numbness overwhelms the moment.

There has to be a reason for it all. Don't believe in destiny? When the confetti fell and LSU danced on the field in the Superdome, the road to destiny was finally complete. What a strange, weird ride it was.

LSU lost twice as the nation's No. 1 team—both times in triple overtime while giving up an astounding 93 points—yet still found a way to the championship game, buoyed by the confounding BCS points system.

And on the last week of the season, double-digit underdog Pitt had to beat No. 2 West Virginia in Morgantown and Oklahoma had to beat No. 1 Missouri for a second time this season in the Big



After being hit with a 10-point deficit, Flynn (above) coolly directed LSU to the game's next 31 points. Tigers defenders, led by Luke Sanders (35), had plenty to celebrate.

12 championship before LSU could even play for it all. And—and—the Tigers had to beat surging Tennessee in the SEC championship game with a backup quarterback.

Destiny shmestiny. It's all coincidence, right? Even the part about the national championship game being played 79 miles outside Baton Rouge in a city that bleeds purple and gold.

"When we were on the flight home from the SEC championship game, the pilot kept giving us updates," says LSU quarterback Matt Flynn. "At one point, after we knew Oklahoma was winning big, he said, 'I think West Virginia lost.' I thought, 'My God, this is happening.'"

It should come as no surprise that after Ohio State took a 10-0 lead in the first quarter, after it looked like the Buckeyes really were ready to play this time and bury the longstanding SEC speed vs. Big Ten strength argument, LSU bowed up and ran off the next 31 points.

Along the way to finishing off their second

## SN's final top 25

1. LSU, 12-2 (2)
2. Ohio State, 11-2 (17)
3. Georgia, 11-2 (14)
4. USC, 11-2 (1)
5. West Virginia, 11-2 (4)
6. Oklahoma, 11-3 (13)
7. Missouri, 12-2 (NR)
8. Kansas, 12-1 (NR)
9. Virginia Tech, 11-3 (7)
10. Boston College, 11-3 (NR)
11. Texas, 10-3 (6)
12. Auburn, 9-4 (16)
13. Clemson, 9-4 (NR)
14. Michigan, 9-4 (3)
15. Florida, 9-4 (5)
16. Illinois, 9-4 (NR)
17. Tennessee, 10-4 (18)
18. Wisconsin, 9-4 (8)
19. Hawaii, 12-1 (22)
20. BYU, 11-2 (25)
21. Arizona State, 10-3 (NR)
22. Cincinnati, 10-3 (NR)
23. Oregon State, 9-4 (NR)
24. Texas Tech, 9-4 (NR)
25. Oregon, 9-4 (NR)

Preseason rank in parentheses







**A heralded recruit five years ago, Matt Flynn sat four years in Baton Rouge. But then it all came together in one magical night with everything on the line.**

national championship in five years, the Tigers squeezed every ounce of karma out of the season-long ride. All of those gutsy fourth-down calls against Florida. The improbable throw into the end zone against Auburn. The fourth quarter comeback against Alabama and former LSU coach Nick Saban. Winning the SEC championship game with Ryan Perrilloux at quarterback, the same Perrilloux who twice had been suspended from the team.

How else do you explain Ohio State falling all over itself in the biggest game of the year? Again.

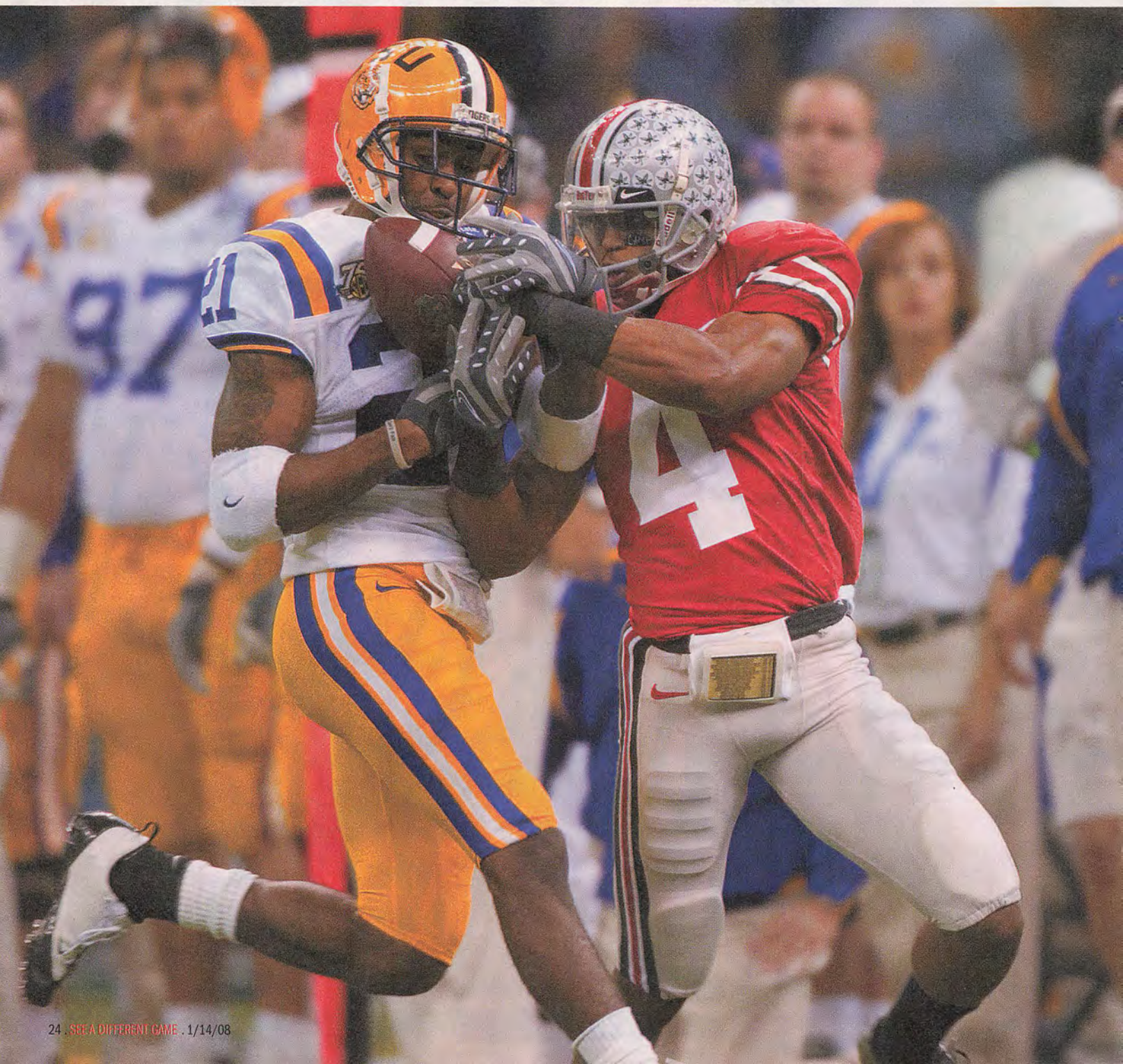
Turnovers, personal fouls, missed tackles. You name it, Ohio State did it.

By the time it was over, the Buckeyes had given up more points than it had since the 41-14 emasculation at the hands of Florida in last year's national title game.

"Everyone makes a big deal out of the SEC vs. the Big Ten," Flynn says. "It takes a lot more than just speed to win big games. It's talent, hard work, luck. ... I don't know, it all just came together."

It's corny and contrived, but you can't stop a

**Chevis Jackson's interception and subsequent 34-yard return helped set up an LSU touchdown in the defining second quarter.**







train of destiny. Think about it: In their final regular-season game, the Tigers lost as the nation's No. 1 team, yet there they were in the end, the first two-time champions in the BCS era.

Still not convinced? Consider the stories of the game's most valuable players: defensive lineman Ricky Jean-Francois and Flynn. Jean-Francois was suspended 12 games this fall because of an "academic honesty" issue yet was cleared to play by the LSU dean of students office for the SEC title game.

Jean-Francois grew up in Miami and played high school football at Carol City, a tough inner-city school with a history of sending players to the Miami Hurricanes. But Jean-Francois, who has French ancestry, never felt at home, and he signed with LSU, in part because of the chance to play in a state with such deep French/Acadian history.

Jean-Francois dominated the interior line of scrimmage against Ohio State—playing better than the All-American Dorsey—and blocked a field goal attempt after yet another mistake by the Buckeyes. With the score 10-10, Ohio State quarterback Todd Boeckman threw a perfect deep ball to Brian Robiskie, who dropped it in the end zone and forced the Buckeyes to try for three.

Jean-Francois pancaked long snapper Ben Per-



son and extended his 6-3, 281-pound frame just enough to block the 38-yard attempt. The play ignited LSU and the pro-Tigers crowd and led to three straight touchdowns that put the game away. It's a long way from academic suspension to big-game hero.

"Stupid mistake," Jean-Francois says. "I knew it wasn't over for me. I knew there was something left for me this season."

Just like there was something left for Flynn. A heralded recruit five years ago, Flynn sat four years in Baton Rouge—behind a quarterback who won a national title (Matt Mauck) and another who became the first pick in the NFL draft (JaMarcus

**LSU tight end Richard Dickson doubled his pleasure with two TD catches, but to Miles, the only number that mattered was 1.**

Russell)—before finally getting his chance. When Flynn's time finally arrived, he suffered a severe high ankle sprain in the second week against Virginia Tech, one that affected his entire senior season.

The LSU offense never found a consistent rhythm after the injury, never reached its potential. Flynn's ankle—and later, a deep shoulder bruise—forced him to miss two games and never allowed

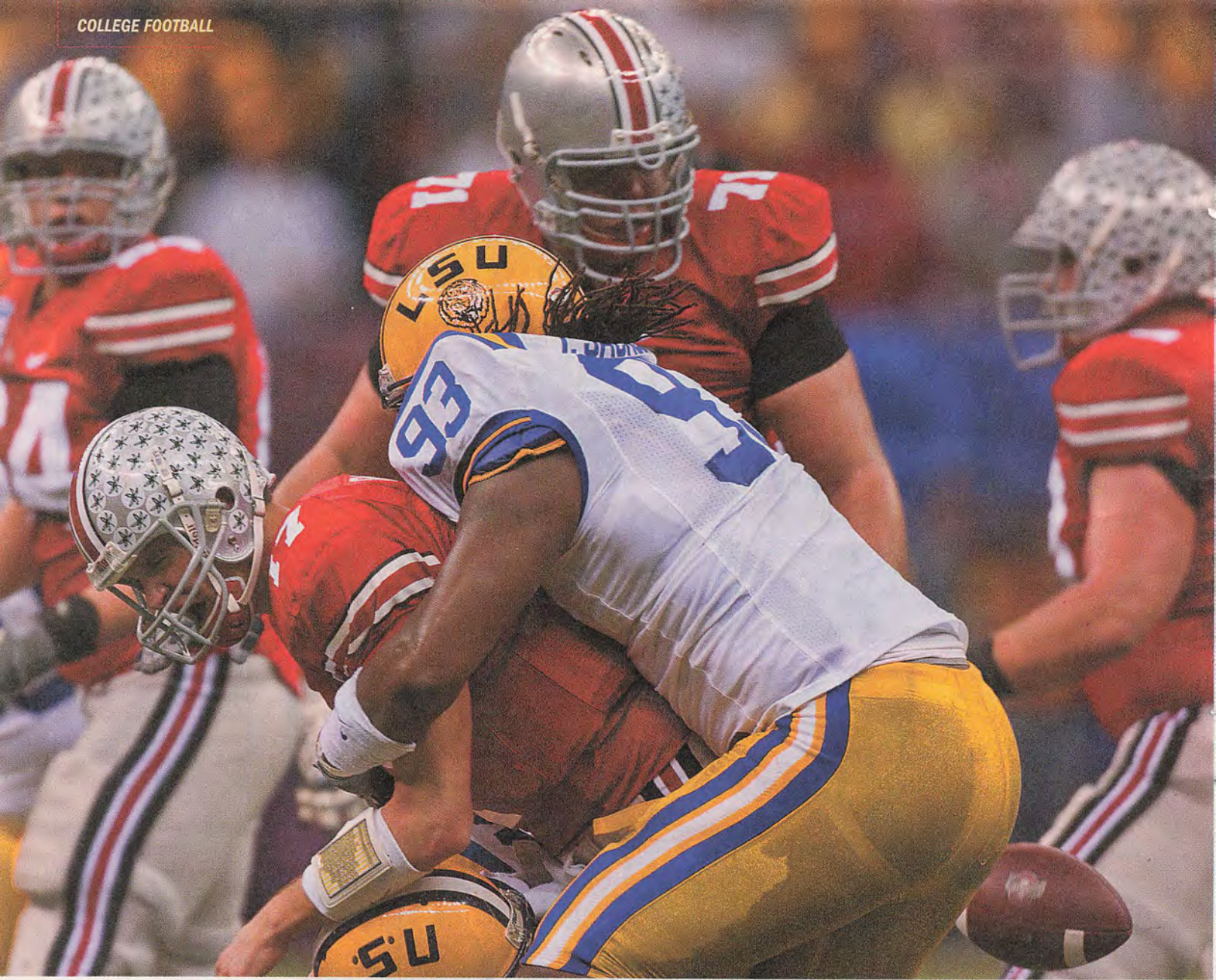
him to develop timing with the receivers.

Then there was star wideout Early Doucet's nagging groin injury, and the rest of a young receiving corps that never found itself.

"We weren't helping Matty, that's for sure," Doucet says. "People think he didn't play that well this season. They don't know everything that went into it and what he went through."

It wasn't until the final week of bowl practice in Baton Rouge that Flynn felt as healthy as he had before he injured the ankle sliding out of bounds on a scramble. For weeks he struggled to plant and stride, things that affected his accuracy and confidence. He played through the Arkansas loss with





**Tyson Jackson recorded one of LSU's five sacks of Boeckman, who also threw two interceptions as the Buckeyes' offense lost its way.**

his shoulder injury. He couldn't throw without feeling a sharp pain through his shoulder and into his neck.

But then it all came together in one magical night with everything on the line: efficient, accurate play and four touchdown passes.

"I can't lie—there were certainly times when I thought about transferring," Flynn says. "I thought my parents were only going to see me as the guy who held on kicks."

Instead he became the guy who won a national title. At least, as far as the BCS is concerned. Because accepting this championship as reality means forgetting that LSU may not have been the best two-loss team in the country when the BCS ratings system spit out the Tigers a month ago.

In fact, this looks like déjà vu all over again. The Tigers beat Oklahoma to win the 2003 BCS championship, but USC won the Associated Press national title. LSU won both this time

around, but it's hard to argue that USC shouldn't have been playing in this game.

And what about Georgia? You know, the same team that beat the ever-loving *haka* out of Hawaii in the Sugar Bowl, the Bulldogs' seventh straight win.

That's even better than USC's five-game winning streak, particularly when you consider Georgia plays in the nation's best conference.

And LSU? The Tigers won their last two games of the season. So did Notre Dame.

Here's an idea: Take the final eight teams in the NFL playoffs and plop them in bowl games based on some funky points system. Then after the four bowl games are finished, pick a champion. And if the unbeaten Patriots lose, well, they better hope that voter in Waterloo takes into account their entire body of work—not just one game.

"Certainly there's some argument about who is the best team," Miles says, "but the national champion has been crowned."

The morning before the championship game, John Swofford, ACC commissioner and incoming BCS czar, said he would explore all avenues of a "plus-one" championship format to further a play-off-type discussion. Bless his soul, he doesn't know what he's getting into.

A week earlier, Ohio State president Gordon Gee, the most powerful president in the NCAA, had said this about the college football postseason: "They'll have to wrench a playoff system out of my cold, dead hands."

This BCS contraption has been compared to a cartel, an organized group of conferences who hold the game hostage in some weird game of keep-away. Nothing could be further from the truth.

If the BCS is anything, it's a system full of mystery until the last play of the season. A system of a little luck and a whole lot of destiny.

Even Marie Laveau can appreciate that.

**SN**



# That's a wrap

Our airtight topper to the bowl season seals in freshness 'til next fall *By Tom Dienhart*

Bowl	Result	What it means
<b>Orange</b>	Kansas 24, Virginia Tech 21	The Jayhawks are legit and primed to be a preseason top 10 team.
<b>Fiesta</b>	West Virginia 48, Oklahoma 28	OU's stumblings in BCS games has it at risk of falling from the elite. The Sooners will be in position for redemption.
<b>Sugar</b>	Georgia 41, Hawaii 10	The Warriors weren't ready for prime time, and the Dawgs made a case to be in the preseason top five.
<b>Rose</b>	USC 49, Illinois 17	USC made a loud statement that it is still the premier program in America.
<b>GMAC</b>	Tulsa 63, Bowling Green 7	Todd Graham is one of the best coaches in the non-BCS ranks and has Tulsa pointed toward a breakthrough.
<b>International</b>	Rutgers 52, Ball State 30	The Scarlet Knights are ready to move beyond not-for-prime-time bowls and into the national elite.
<b>Gator</b>	Texas Tech 31, Virginia 28	The Red Raiders will be Big 12 contenders as long as Mike Leach is calling the shots. And 2008 could be the year they break out to win the South Division.
<b>Capital One</b>	Michigan 41, Florida 35	It doesn't mean much—Michigan will have a different look with Rich Rodriguez installing his spread offense.
<b>Cotton</b>	Missouri 38, Arkansas 7	The Tigers have arrived; they've set themselves up to be a preseason top 10 team with the return of stars such as quarterback Chase Daniel.
<b>Outback</b>	Tennessee 21, Wisconsin 17	Phillip Fulmer has removed himself from the hot seat, but he'll face a new challenge in 2008 as he works in a new offensive coordinator.
<b>Chick-fil-A</b>	Auburn 23, Clemson 20, OT	New coordinator Tony Franklin unveiled glimpses of the spread offense he's installing at Auburn. It promises to be explosive enough to make the Tigers SEC title contenders.
<b>Insight</b>	Oklahoma State 49, Indiana 33	Oklahoma State still isn't a complete team. The offense is fantastic, but until the Pokes find a defense, they won't be serious Big 12 contenders.
<b>Music City</b>	Kentucky 35, Florida State 28	This caps the best two-year run in more than 50 years for Kentucky, but it will be difficult to keep it going without QB Andre' Woodson.
<b>Humanitarian</b>	Fresno State 40, Georgia Tech 28	Fresno State should make the preseason top 25 but must play UCLA, Kansas State and Wisconsin early.
<b>Sun</b>	Oregon 56, South Florida 21	The Ducks might have found their quarterback of the future in Justin Roper, who helped produce the most unlikely rout of the postseason.
<b>Armed Forces</b>	Cal 42, Air Force 36	Cal showed it had a little bit of heart after its season-ending tank job. And it also might have its quarterback of the future: Kevin Riley.
<b>Independence</b>	Alabama 30, Colorado 24	Nick Saban's painful first step in rebuilding the Tide is over. More vital: Bama avoided what could have been consecutive losing seasons for the first time in 50 years.
<b>Alamo</b>	Penn State 24, Texas A&M 17	It means very little, considering Texas A&M is changing coaches. Penn State doesn't appear poised for greatness as long as JoePa is coach.
<b>Liberty</b>	Mississippi State 10, UCF 3	The reconstruction of Mississippi State is almost complete. The next step: making another bowl next season.
<b>Meineke Car Care</b>	Wake Forest 24, UConn 10	The Deacs aren't a fluke. That's 20 victories in two years for little ol' Wake, which won the Orange Bowl after last season.
<b>Emerald</b>	Oregon State 21, Maryland 14	The Beavers continue to validate themselves as the best program no one knows about and will be a Pac-10 dark horse behind emerging running back James Rodgers.
<b>Texas</b>	TCU 20, Houston 13	Freshman quarterback Andy Dalton's 249 passing yards give reason to believe the Horned Frogs will continue to be an elite non-BCS team.
<b>Champs Sports</b>	Boston College 24, Michigan State 21	An eighth straight bowl win confirms Boston College is a very good—though not great—program. What's next with quarterback Matt Ryan gone?
<b>Holiday</b>	Texas 52, Arizona State 34	The Longhorns showed spunk on defense and set the stage for a return to dominance.
<b>Motor City</b>	Purdue 51, Central Michigan 48	There is hope for a sagging Boilermakers program as it chugs toward what figures to be Joe Tiller's final year.
<b>Hawaii</b>	East Carolina 41, Boise State 38	Boise State went from national darling to minor bowl flop. East Carolina is poised for non-BCS greatness.
<b>Las Vegas</b>	BYU 17, UCLA 16	More proof that BYU is back on track to being the BYU we knew, loved and sometimes hated under LaVell Edwards.
<b>New Mexico</b>	New Mexico 23, Nevada 0	Finally! The Lobos got their first postseason win in 46 years—and they did it in style, delivering Nevada's first shutout since 1980 (a span of 329 games).
<b>Papajohns.com</b>	Cincinnati 31, Southern Miss 21	These are programs going in opposite directions. This was Jeff Bower's final game at USM, and Brian Kelly looks like he's in for a great run at Cincinnati.
<b>New Orleans</b>	Florida Atlantic 44, Memphis 27	Howard Schnellenberger has a rising program in South Florida. Does this sound familiar? Fear the pipe.
<b>Poinsettia</b>	Utah 35, Navy 32	With seven bowl wins in a row, the Utes are the best non-BCS team you never hear about.



# Just wait 'til next season

Get a load of the coming attractions—including the biggest games, Timmy and Jimmy—and a look at coaches who might find themselves behind the '08 ball *By Matt Hayes*



**Missouri.** OK, I love Mizzou because of plucky quarterback Chase Daniel. The dude has game.

## Eight national title contenders

**BYU.** The Cougars' offense is loaded, and their defense will rebuild. BYU was the last non-big boy to win it all—in 1984. Why not again? Of course, BYU is only first on this list alphabetically.

**Florida.** Can Tim Tebow play cornerback? Defensive tackle? The Gators are extremely talented, but a lot of their young guys have no idea what they're doing.

**Georgia.** Everyone's excited about the Dawgs, but their seven straight wins came against teams (Vanderbilt, Florida, Troy, Auburn, Kentucky, Georgia Tech, Hawaii) with 31 total losses.

**Ohio State.** The Buckeyes have been to three national title games in six years. Enough said.

**Oklahoma.** Until further notice, I'd rather watch reruns of *Three's Company* than see the Sooners in a big game outside the Big 12.

**USC.** The Trojans, of course, have the most talent in the history of talent. One teensy-weensy problem: Who will play quarterback? Arkansas transfer Mitch Mustain will compete with onetime mega-recruit Mark Sanchez.

**West Virginia.** A new coach and new staff will be running the spread option. It's not as simple as you might think. Better teams have crumbled in such situations.





## Eight Heisman candidates

**QB Sam Bradford, Oklahoma, So.** As a freshman, he threw thirty-freaking-six touchdown passes.

**QB Chase Daniel, Missouri, Sr.** A finalist this season, he'll be back unless his really fast teammate zooms past him.

**QB Pat White, West Virginia, Sr.** When he's healthy, no player affects a game more.

**LB James Laurinaitis, Ohio State, Sr.** Now that Tebow has broken the sophomore barrier, why can't Laurinaitis end the bias against defensive players?

**WR/KR Jeremy Maclin, Missouri, So.** A jaw-drop waiting to happen.

**QB Todd Reesing, Kansas, Jr.** Hey, Doug Flutie was 5-foot-nothin', too. And Reesing won't need a miracle throw.

**QB Tim Tebow, Florida, Jr.** If Florida doesn't find a tailback, Tebow won't survive '08.

**RB Chris Wells, Ohio State, Jr.** This bruising, talented runner could have been a finalist this season.

## Eight can't-miss nonconference games

**Illinois vs. Missouri, August 30.** Two top 10 teams will clash in the college football mecca that is St. Louis. Please, no more rivalries in antiseptic domes.

**Tennessee at UCLA, September 6.** New UCLA coach Rick Neuheisel thought beating USC would be difficult. First, he gets the only SEC team that *wants* tough nonconference games.

**Auburn at West Virginia, September 6.** When Tommy Tuberville asked to play a directional school, surely he meant Western Michigan, not West Virginia.

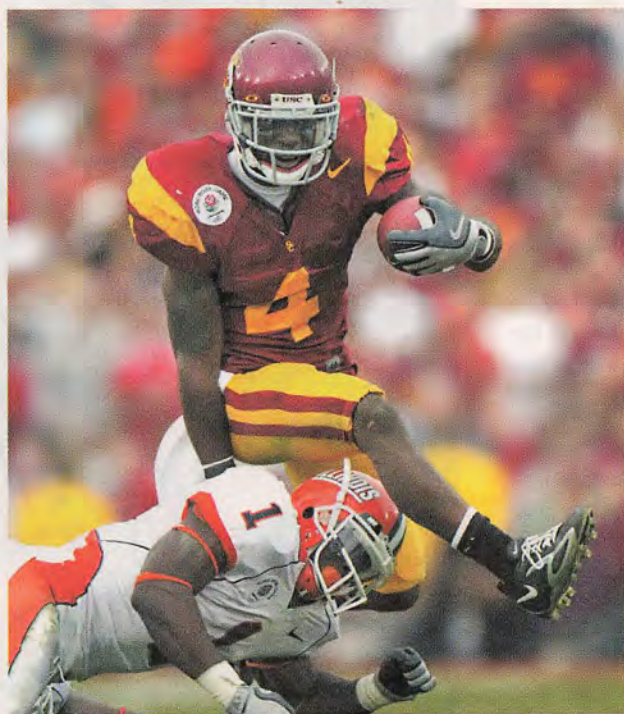
**Miami at Florida, September 6.** The Gators haven't beaten the Canes since 1985. Part of the reason is that Florida begged out of the series two years later—you know, because the SEC is so tough and all.

**Ohio State at USC, September 13.** This could be No. 1 vs. No. 2. Better find a ticket broker, say, *now*.

**Kansas at South Florida, September 13.** Well, well; a bona fide nonconference game for KU. But can we all now admit the Jayhawks deserved their top 10 ranking?

**Arkansas at Texas, September 13.** Houston Nutt was 2-1 against Texas. Hogs coach Bobby Petrino will be long gone from Fayetteville before he gets a third shot at the Longhorns.

**Georgia at Arizona State, September 20.** We'll be force-fed some serious Dawg love. Here's a road opportunity for Georgia to earn it.



## Eight breakout performers

**RB Jahvid Best, California, So.** The country's fastest player will get the ball 20-plus times a game.

**QB Jimmy Clausen, Notre Dame, So.** Laugh all you want at ND, but Clausen will be a completely different player in September.

**RB Noel Devine, West Virginia, So.** It's obvious now, isn't it? Devine is better than Steve Slaton.

**QB Pat Devlin, Penn State, Fr.** Redshirted in 2007, he has the moxie and temperament the Nittany Lions have lacked.

**QB Justin Roper, Oregon, So.** He wasn't all there as a backup, but he played with passion and poise as a starter.

**WR Josh Smith, Colorado, So.** Speed, speed, speed.

**LB Martez Wilson, Illinois, So.** Remember Jevon Kearse way back when? Wilson will redefine the pass-rush specialist spot again.

**RB Joe McKnight, USC, So.** McKnight is the most talented player in Pete Carroll's tenure at USC. That includes some guy named Bush.

## Eight coaches under pressure

**Bobby Bowden, Florida State.** It has come to this: Return to the top of the ACC or be forced out.

**Kirk Ferentz, Iowa.** One of the top five highest-paid coaches shouldn't lose 18 games in three seasons.

**Steve Kragthorpe, Louisville.** The new defensive staff better produce—especially with state rival Kentucky surging.

**Greg Robinson, Syracuse.** Three seasons, 28 losses, the worst team in the Big East. Not a good combination.

**Nick Saban, Alabama.** Lose six games again—and to Auburn, again—and see what that gets you in Tuscaloosa.

**Bill Stewart, West Virginia.** Here comes the pressure of coaching a team capable of reaching the BCS title game. Camelot lasts only so long.

**Charlie Weis, Notre Dame.** Buy him out at \$4 million-plus? Another disaster like '07 and that's chump change.

**Tyrone Willingham, Washington.** He and Weis will be forever linked. And both could be out of jobs by the end of '08.



WVU's big bowl win should have been a nice snapshot, not a big-picture view of the future.

# Building the Mountaineers out of a molehill

By Matt Hayes

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**L**ook, I don't want to throw a sopping blanket on the feel-good story of the college football postseason. But what in the world is West Virginia doing?

Lose a program-defining coach, gain Gomer Pyle.

Bill Stewart is a nice man and by all accounts a coach who will give his all to West Virginia. But instead of hiring the best man available, the administration hired the best fan available.

*Surprise, surprise, surprise.*

What a month it has been in Morgantown.

■ Lose one of the biggest games in school history—to your bitter rival, a double-digit underdog, no less—with a spot in the national title game a whiff away.

■ Lose the best coach in school history because, well, petty principle has to stand for something.

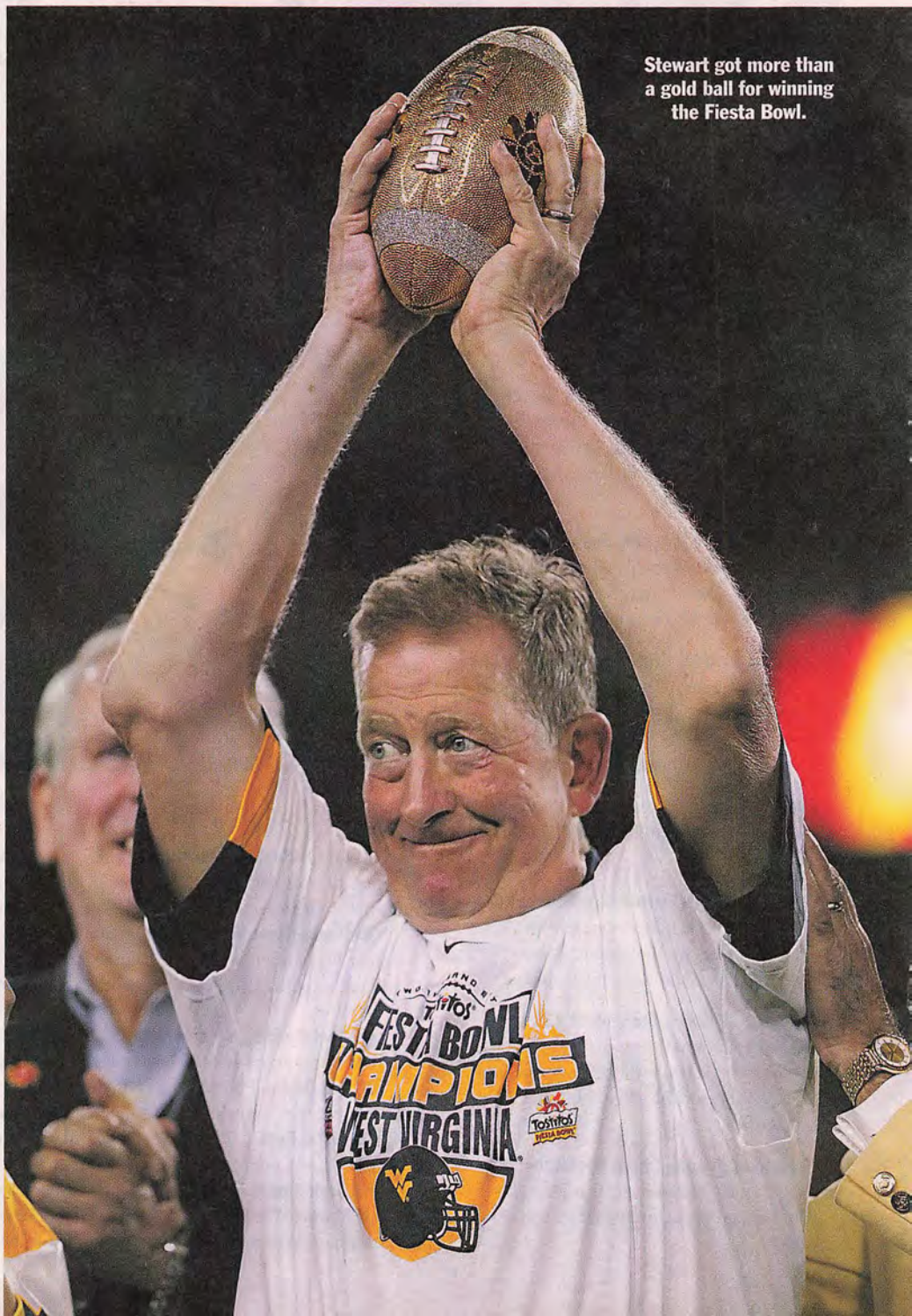
■ Search for another coach while the dirty underbelly of political infighting is exposed for all to see.

■ Then, of course, win a BCS bowl game and hire the caretaker who just happened to be in the right place when a group of motivated, talented players took out their frustrations on the poor saps from Oklahoma.

No team would have beaten West Virginia in the Fiesta Bowl. Not Ohio State, LSU, USC or Georgia.

That's not to say the Mountaineers were the nation's best team; it's more of a reflection of what emotion and motivation mean in college sports. Once Rich Rodriguez left West Virginia for Michigan, once he turned his back on everything he built in Morgantown and everything it means to anyone who has sung "Country Roads" at the end of a home game, the Mountaineers weren't losing.

And because it took so long to find another coach, because two factions within the search committee—the big-money boosters and the old guard at the school led by former coach Don Nehlen—could never come to an agreement, the interim coach became the permanent coach when the inevitable happened.



Stewart got more than a gold ball for winning the Fiesta Bowl.



The high rollers wanted former Auburn coach Terry Bowden, and the old guard wanted Florida assistant Doc Holliday. And there was Stewart, smiling and preaching love for West By God Virginia.

So the Mountaineers win the Fiesta Bowl, the search committee gets caught up in the euphoria and a drawn-out process that had begun to embarrass the university and state gets boiled down to a little more than three hours in the Arizona desert. All for a guy who was told he wasn't a serious candidate when this whole mess began.

Who knows what kind of head coach Stewart will be? Can he recruit, and will he be able to find a coordinator who can run Rodriguez's ultrasuccessful spread option? That was Calvin Magee calling plays last week for West Virginia—the same Magee who is now Michigan's offensive coordinator.

What happens when Stewart is forced to tell Steve Slaton that he has gone from Heisman Trophy candidate to backup running back? Or when the elation of the Fiesta Bowl wears thin and the players don't fear the coach they loved and hugged in a moment of need?

"I will never leave West Virginia," says Stewart, 55. "This is my last job."

The question is, how long will he hold it? It's easy to sit in the big chair when an entire team is focused on something much bigger than what any win could bring.

Just ask Larry Coker.

When Butch Davis left Miami after the 2000 season, after pledging his loyalty to his players and the school, nice-guy Coker was given the keys to the Ferrari after a public search with equally public rejections from some of the game's best coaches. The instructions to Coker were simple: Turn the key and don't let off the gas.

It worked for a couple of seasons, but then Coker had to recruit, had to develop a quarterback, had to find an identity. Next thing you know, Gomer Pyle couldn't get out of his own way and the most memorable thing from his final season was a brawl with a nothing team in a nothing game.

Now the Canes lose by 48 at home.

*Surprise, surprise, surprise.*

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Tom Dienhart will have all the news from the American Football Coaches Association convention at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



Riley showed nice mobility in Cal's bowl comeback and will be a strong candidate to win the QB job next fall.

Florida will play more of a two-quarterback system next fall to keep Heisman Trophy winner **Tim Tebow** healthy. By the end of the season, running the demanding spread option left him with shoulder, hand and ankle injuries. Developing a dependable running back would help, but the focus this spring will be backup QB **Cameron Newton**'s progress in the passing game. The staff didn't trust Newton to play in critical spots this



season, and Tebow paid for it with the pounding he absorbed. ➤ California QB **Kevin Riley**'s play in the Armed Forces Bowl clearly puts him in the lead for the job next fall, though coach **Jeff Tedford** says the position is open. It's obvious Riley has what starter **Nate Longshore** doesn't: moxie and mobility. Longshore's ankle injury hurt his play this fall, but he was healthy for the bowl game and played poorly against an average Air Force defense. Riley rallied the team from a 21-0 deficit and looked a lot like former Cal star **Aaron Rodgers**.

➤ For those who thought expanding would make the ACC a top-tier football league, consider this: The conference was 2-6 in bowl games this season and fell to 1-9 in BCS bowls after its eighth straight BCS loss. Get this: Since expanding four years ago, Miami—the key to the groundbreaking move—is 16-16 in conference games and hasn't played in the league championship game.

➤ Tennessee's beleaguered pass defense—the Volunteers gave up 25 touchdown passes this fall—could get a huge boost before next season begins. Talented S **Demetrice Morley**, who was dismissed from the team last spring because of academic issues, will reenroll and participate in spring drills. More help could come from **Vince Faison**, an elite recruit in 1999 who signed with Georgia but chose to play professional baseball in the Padres' organization. Faison will be 27 when spring drills begin and will push for a starting cornerback spot.

## speedreads

Yes, USC won the Pac-10 and played in its sixth straight BCS game—but only after Dennis Dixon's knee injury derailed Oregon's championship season. And yes, the Trojans beat up Illinois, but the young Illini weren't ready for the enormity of the Rose Bowl. I'm not jumping back on the USC bandwagon just yet.

If Kirk Ferentz were ever tempted by the NFL, now is the time to jump. Iowa has become a stale program, and Ferentz won't be considered a hot coaching commodity much longer. Besides, how long will Iowa pay \$2.8 million a year for 6-6 seasons?

The most impressive win of the postseason: Missouri over Arkansas. Maybe Gary Pinkel really has grown as a coach. After getting gashed by Oklahoma's running game in the Big 12 championship, the Tigers made adjustments and dominated the line of scrimmage against the Hogs.



Life as a big fish in a little pond has its struggles.

# The March of the Bulldogs

By Mike DeCourcy

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**B**utler coach Brad Stevens claims to be focusing strictly on the Horizon League season and not on the Bulldogs' NCAA Tournament plans. "I'll start thinking about March around midnight on ... isn't this a leap year?" he says. "I'll start thinking about March around midnight on February 29."

Well, he blew his cover, didn't he? He's supposed to be all tunnel-visioned, but Stevens probably remembers his wife's birthday, too. And maybe even that Selection Sunday is March 16.

When those of us who write regularly about this sport mention these Bulldogs, we talk not about whether they will be in the NCAAs but how high a seed they can earn. It's meant as a compliment. It's not that easy, though, even for the best teams.

"We've got to get ready for the grind like everybody else does," Stevens says. He means everybody from North Carolina to North Florida, everybody who belongs to a conference and will be crammed into the scalding crucible of league play in January and February.

The difference for Butler, like Gonzaga and Memphis before it, is getting used to the necessity of maintaining the highest level of intensity even as the glamour of preconference games against big-name opponents fades into the tiny print of the Bulldogs' NCAA Tournament resume.

Butler's sexiest regular-season games are pretty much in the past. There was the Great Alaska Shootout championship, courtesy of victories over Michigan, Virginia Tech and Texas Tech. Then came the pitiless blowout of visiting Ohio State and the Wooden Tradition win against Florida State. There was the topper at Southern Illinois, with star guard A.J. Graves launching and landing a game-winning 35-footer at the buzzer.

The Bulldogs entered the new year in the top 10 in the Ratings Percentage Index standings. They've won 10 of their past 11 games against teams from the big-money football conferences. All of that will mean something when the NCAA selection

committee convenes in a couple of months but won't matter at all when Butler is on the road at Illinois-Chicago in late February—except to make the Flames aware an upset might get their highlights on ESPN.

"That's just something our team has to deal with," Stevens says. "I think the Horizon, by far, is the best it's ever been. It's going to be a great challenge for us. Our guys know that. They have never put stock in anything other than trying to play together and get ready for the next game. I know it's a challenge to get young guys to think that way, especially when certain games get hyped more than others."

This is Stevens' first season as head coach. Though barely out of his teens—OK, he's 31, but he looks as if he's audition-

ing for a Clearasil commercial—he has directed Butler with surprising levels of wisdom and calm.

This is his first time in charge as the Bulldogs navigate the Horizon, but he has been through the conference enough as an assistant at Butler to understand the task.

Stevens has to continue to draw mature performances from freshman power forward Matt Howard and to keep guards Graves and Mike Green focused on executing Butler's offense as flawlessly as possible. Because the Bulldogs aren't a physically imposing team, execution is paramount. Even the slightest

slip can set them back—such as in their 43-42 loss to conference opponent Wright State—but with three freshmen and one sophomore in the rotation, there is every reason to believe the Bulldogs will improve.

And it won't hurt that they've got an extra day to practice this year.

But that's one more day between them and all that March fun.

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**When we talk about Butler, we talk not about whether it will make the NCAA Tournament but how high the seed will be.**



To keep Butler from slipping during league play, Stevens (left) will have to get flawless performances from Graves and his teammates.





## And the clock struck midnight ...

When George Mason reached the 2006 Final Four, proponents of mid-major basketball heralded a new age of college hoops parity. Only two years later, it's hard to find anyone beyond Butler to support that case. Few teams from traditional mid-major leagues look as if they'll be NCAA-bound without winning automatic bids. Among those on the shortlist:

**Saint Mary's.** The Gaels are third in the RPI rankings and have beaten Oregon, Seton Hall, Drake and Ohio. They've played only two opponents ranked worse than 200th.

**Drake.** Victories against Iowa and Iowa State might not be worth much in the end, but success in the Valley would count for something.

**Kent State.** Although North Carolina and Xavier kicked around the Flashes, they have beaten solid mids George Mason and Illinois State. The Mid-American Conference hasn't had multiple bids since 1999. This team could help end that slump.

### ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

For Mike DeCourcy's take on the hottest teams, players and games, check out his college hoops roundup at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com) every Monday.

## speedreads

It has been easy for folks to jump on Derrick Caracter as Louisville's problem, especially when the no-character puns are so handy. But the Cardinals' issues run deeper, and coach Rick Pitino has made that clear. If Caracter were removed from the roster tomorrow, there still would be problems to solve.

Did you see how Xavier destroyed Kansas State and Virginia in consecutive games? Combined score: 211-147. Next up at the cineplex: *Xavier vs. Predator*.

In case you weren't sure, Eddie Sutton's comeback to serve as interim coach at San Francisco really is about getting to 800 career victories. "I am giving my walking papers when this season ends," he said at a recent news conference, explaining that he wants to return to working on fundraising projects and spending time with his family. It's the feel-good story of the year, isn't it?

Rose won't be at Memphis for long, but he's working hard to make a big impression while he's there.



The absence of UCLA reserve SF **Michael Roll** (foot) for at least two more weeks led to the decision to remove a redshirt from PF **James Keefe**. He can't fill in at Roll's position but does provide depth. Keefe sat out the first 13 games because of an off-season shoulder injury but will provide solid rebounding and another scoring threat once he's comfortable again. ➤ In an effort to get more production from his bench, Memphis coach **John Calipari** began leading one-on-one sessions with his reserves during the holiday break. That helped freshman G **Jeff Robinson** to a 20-point, 10-rebound performance in just 12 minutes against Siena. The "problem" with that approach: Star freshman PG **Derrick Rose** began hanging around the sessions, angling for some extra attention. Rose is committed to growing as much as possible in what will almost certainly be his only college season. ➤ Pitt had planned to lose seniors C **Aaron Gray**, PF **Levon Kendall** and SG **Antonio Graves** from last year's team, but it was hard to prepare for the losses of SF **Mike Cook** (knee) and PG **Levance Fields** (foot) in consecutive December games. Cook is out for the season, but Fields might be back by mid-February. Without Fields, senior **Ronald Ramon** moves to the point and **Keith Benjamin**,

## INSIDE DISH

a career reserve, becomes the starter at shooting guard. Freshman **Bradley Wanamaker** will now play a huge role; he'll get minutes at both point and shooting guard. It's also possible Pitt will play more frequently with a "big" lineup that shifts 6-6 **Sam**

**Young** to small forward and puts 6-8 **Tyrell Biggs** at power forward next to 6-7 **C DeJuan Blair**. ➤ Baylor's guard depth is a match for anyone's. The Bears get 70 percent of their points from the top five perimeter players and do that without relying too heavily on 3s. But beyond 6-9 **F Kevin Rogers**, Baylor survives with a committee of frontcourt players. Coach **Scott Drew** uses four big men for stretches of 10 to 17 minutes and stresses defensive execution with them. None is exceptionally productive as a scorer. ➤ The Missouri Valley Conference has sent its regular-season champion to the NCAA Tournament for 14 consecutive years—even though that team hasn't always gotten there by winning the league's automatic bid. Some of the Valley's glamour teams were not as imposing in this season's preconference games as they'd been in recent years, but this still is the eighth-rated conference in the RPI. The regular-season champ ought to be in the NAAs, one way or the other.



# Swing and a Miss

All those predictions about the Rebels falling flat in the SEC West? Uh, they were a little off. *By Ryan Fagan*



Curtis doesn't miss much—just one reason the Rebels are blowing up the preseason picks.

**T**here's no hiding in Andy Kennedy's program.

Certainly not on the court, where his Ole Miss Rebels have more get-up-and-go than an average NASCAR race. And most definitely not off the court, where Kennedy's crew was picked to finish last in the SEC West in more preseason publications than they'd like to count. There was no hiding in Oxford, only embracing. "We definitely get motivation from it," senior Dwayne Curtis says. "A.K., what he does is read an article that says that, and he'll post it up in all our lockers to show what they think about us."

Every locker? "Oh yeah, every locker," Curtis says with a laugh. "He's going to make sure we know exactly what people think about us." Last year, the Rebs shocked just about everybody by claiming a share of the SEC West regular-season title in Kennedy's first season at Ole Miss, but they lost three starters and more than half of their scoring. So it was back to the realm of pessimistic predictions. From the world outside Oxford, that is.

Safe to say opinions are starting to change. The Rebels rattled off a school-record 13 consecutive wins to start the season heading into an SEC show-

down with Tennessee earlier this week. Included in that streak was a victory over mid-major torch-bearer Winthrop—which has beaten Georgia Tech and Miami this season—and one against previously undefeated Clemson in the title game of the San Juan Shootout.

Ole Miss is succeeding with a good dose of the old and the new. Curtis is helping the Rebels control the boards—they're outrebounding opponents by 8.0 per game—and averaging 15.2 points. Despite being an undersized center at 6-8, Curtis is shooting 68.4 percent from the field. Freshman point guard Chris Warren is putting up an identical scoring average and making almost three 3-pointers per contest. He has already been named SEC freshman of the week twice and was the MVP in San Juan.

But the competition is about to get tougher than it was in Puerto Rico, where the Rebels' path to the title game included two wins over teams that now sport a combined record of 10-15. "The SEC's starting up," Curtis says. "The athletes get a lot better, and the intensity of the game, everything goes up another level. I've been telling the freshmen that everyone else is taking it up another level, so that's exactly what we have to do."

Immediately after the Tennessee test, though, the SEC slate is at least manageable—four games against teams currently ranked 116th or worse by collegeRPI.com. Ole Miss has learned how to defend its home territory—it had a 16-1 record at the Tad Pad last season. Keep that up and steal a few victories on the road and the only hiding the Rebels will be doing is from friends and family looking for free NCAA Tournament tickets. **SN**

## Are you for real?

Ole Miss isn't the only squad crafting a memorable early-season start. Are these teams legitimate contenders for an NCAA Tournament bid or just pretenders with easy schedules?

**Vanderbilt (15-0).** Sure, the Commodores lost Derrick Byars, but **Shan Foster** is back and shooting an amazing 53.3 percent from beyond the arc. Freshman A.J. Ogilvy is averaging 19.3 points and making 80.2 percent of his free throw attempts. Things will get rougher in conference play, but coach Kevin Stallings knows how to win. **Contender.**

**Houston (11-2).** Nice record, but the loss to UMass on January 2 was the Cougars' first true road game and their first matchup against a team in the top 70 in the RPI rankings. Guard Rob McKiver is a player (20.8 points per game), but this backcourt-heavy squad is shooting just 42.0 percent. Plus, Conference USA was a one-bid league last season and currently sits 12th in the rankings. The Cougars will probably need at least 23 wins to get much consideration. **Pretender.**

**Baylor (11-2).** Here's a stat that says something about the Bears' balance—in their first 12 games, six different players led Baylor in scoring. Freshman guard LaceDarius Dunn, one of the best Baylor recruits ever, took a turn with 24 points—including a 6-for-8 performance from 3-point range—in a win at South Carolina. If the Bears can figure out how to finish tight games—they blew second half leads in both of their losses—their balance and depth bodes well for Big 12 play. **Contender.**





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The road doesn't scare the Giants—and neither do the Cowboys.

# Home is where the wins *aren't*

By Clifton Brown

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**T**he Giants are a serious threat to win the NFC championship.

No, I still don't expect them to reach Super Bowl 42. Collectively, they lack talent. And their quarterback, Eli Manning, lacks consistency. But the Giants are dangerous, the kind of team capable of upsetting the Cowboys

on Sunday at Texas Stadium.

For starters, the Giants' 24-14 victory over Tampa Bay in the wild-card round was their eighth consecutive road win. They're more comfortable on the road than a Mercedes-Benz. They were 3-5 at home, but something about a road trip brings out their best. Next season, maybe they should dress in the visitors locker room at Giants Stadium. Maybe their fans should boo when they take the field.



Manning appears to be hitting his stride—and releasing some inner fire—at just the right time.

"We have some mental toughness," says coach Tom Coughlin. "We seem to focus, through the good and the bad. We have a will and a resiliency. That's been big for us."

Knocking out the Cowboys will present a far greater challenge than beating the Buccaneers. The Cowboys have already beaten the Giants twice, and the Cowboys have more playmakers—Tony Romo, Terrell Owens (if healthy), Marion Barber—who can change the course of a game in an instant.

But Manning crossed a psychological barrier against the Bucs, winning his first playoff game. That's something Romo has yet to do, and the Cowboys are not exactly riding momentum after a lackluster loss to the Redskins in the regular-season finale and a bye week.

Brian Westbrook, the Eagles' Pro Bowl running back who knows the Cowboys and Giants very

## speedreads

The Steelers didn't panic during their playoff loss, but their coach did. It was foolish for Mike Tomlin to try a 2-point conversion from the 12-yard line with more than 10 minutes to play.

Norv Turner's face was the picture of relief after the Chargers' playoff win. If he loses to the Colts, it will be no disgrace. Had he lost to the Titans, it would have been.

Maurice Jones-Drew is a game-breaker. The more touches he gets, the better the Jaguars' chances are to reach the Super Bowl.

Some airports aren't as loud as Qwest Field. If the Seahawks had home-field advantage, they'd be hard to keep out of the Super Bowl.

Bucs wide receiver Joey Galloway feels jinxed. He has never won a playoff game in four tries with three different teams. At 36, he's running out of time.



For more on the Jaguars' chances of reaching the Super Bowl, read Clifton Brown's column this week at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



well from division matchups, watched the Giants manhandle the Bucs in Raymond James Stadium and came away impressed.

"It's going to be tough for them to win in Dallas, but I think the Giants have something going," Westbrook says. "It started with the New England game (a 38-35 loss that capped the Patriots' undefeated regular season). They started to get a little swagger. They were able to move the ball, with the

## The Giants' biggest problem will be containing Tony Romo, who has carved up their defense like a Thanksgiving turkey.

run and with the pass. ... I think the Giants have something brewing. I give them a puncher's chance."

The Giants' biggest problem will be containing Romo, who has carved up their defense like a Thanksgiving turkey. In his two games against the Giants, Romo had eight touchdown passes and two interceptions while being sacked just twice. Dallas has done a great job protecting Romo from the Giants' pass rush, occasionally keeping tight end Jason Witten in to block.

If the Giants can't put consistent pressure on Romo, the onus will fall on New York's shaky secondary. But that unit has made strides since it last played Dallas—particularly cornerback Corey Webster, who had an interception against the Bucs. "I think they played better as a defensive secondary than what we gave them credit for," says Bucs quarterback Jeff Garcia.

To beat Dallas, the Giants will need a solid performance from Manning, who was superb in

Tampa (20-for-27, 185 yards, two touchdowns, no interceptions). As a No. 1 draft pick who plays in New York and has Peyton for a brother, Manning is the NFL's most scrutinized quarterback. But getting that first playoff win should allow him to play more freely against the Cowboys. Actually, all the Giants should be loose against the Cowboys, embracing the underdog role.

"We love playing them, we love going down to Dallas," says wide receiver Amani Toomer. "It's probably going to be one of the easiest weeks to prepare, not because they're not good but because they know what we do and we know what they do. They're not going to be able to pull out any secrets against us."

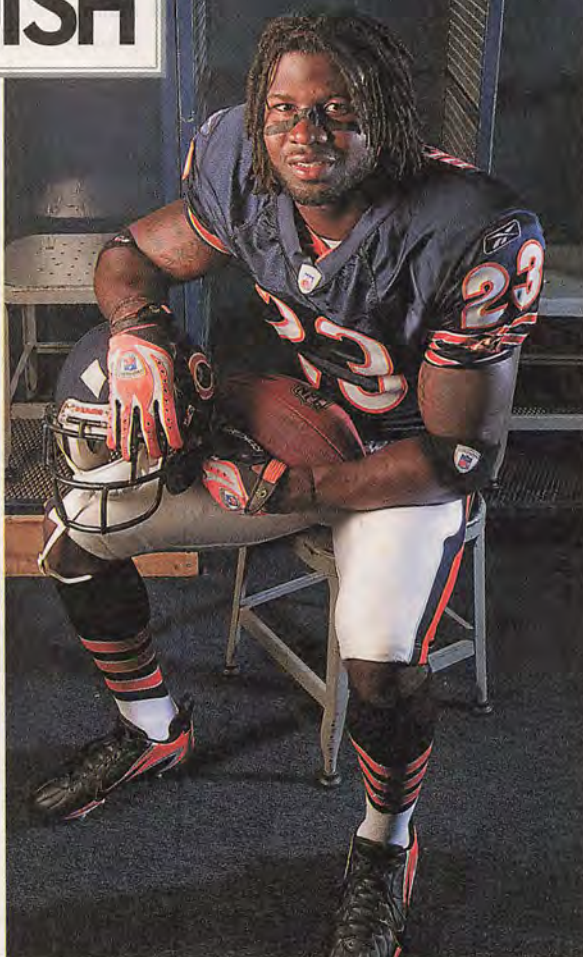
While it's difficult to picture the Giants making the Super Bowl, they have the league's best pass rush, momentum and familiarity with their next opponent. In the NFC, the road to the Super Bowl still goes through Dallas. But the Giants have already proved that no road trip scares them. **SN**

Look for the Bears to explore a long-term contract extension for KR/PR **Devin Hester**, who will be a free agent after the 2009 season. Hester leads Chicago in touchdowns over the past two seasons. The Bears don't usually go to players for new deals after only two years, but they realize Hester is a special talent. ➤

**Ahman Green** was a bust for the Texans, but that doesn't mean he's done in Houston. The team figures to look for another starting running back in the draft or free agency, but it probably will keep Green around because of his effectiveness the rare times he actually got on the field. If he can handle the starting job, so much the better. ➤ Jaguars coach **Jack Del Rio** has one year left on his contract, but he should get an extension before next season. Del Rio's representatives have held preliminary discussions with team owner **Wayne Weaver**, and they don't anticipate problems getting a deal done. But Del Rio's demands won't be limited to money. He wants more control in personnel matters as well as facility upgrades. ➤ Cardinals coaches altered the ground game to better suit RB **Edgerrin James**, but they would like to return to more of a power attack next year. That means more pulling and more downhill running by James. The Cardinals likely will see if they can add a back with some speed during the offseason. ➤ Eagles

## INSIDE DISH

Hester might see big money before most Bears typically do.



CB **Joselio Hanson**'s stock rose after he was elevated to the nickel role when the team demoted struggling CB **William James**. The team likes Hanson's quickness in slot coverage and his blitzing from the inside. Hanson, an unrestricted free agent, likely will command offers, but the Eagles need to retain him. They're dangerously thin in the secondary and are prepared to let James, another free agent, walk. ➤ Despite reports QB **Phillip Rivers** will become a free agent after the season, the Chargers have every intention of buying back the final two years of the contract he signed as a rookie. Playing-time incentives voided the 2010 part of the deal and will force the Chargers to pay more than \$17 million in 2008 and '09. But despite Rivers' struggles, G.M. **A.J. Smith** believes he is the quarterback to take the Chargers to the Super Bowl in the future, if not this year. ➤ The Jets may have another messy contract situation on their hands; WR **Laveranues Coles** has made it clear he wants to renegotiate his deal. The Jets took a public stance in not giving LG **Pete Kendall** a raise last summer but quietly gave RG **Brandon Moore** a better deal. Coach **Eric Mangini** admires Coles' professionalism and ability to play through pain; the question is whether Mangini and G.M. **Mike Tannenbaum** will pony up additional years and guaranteed money for Coles, 30, who missed four games this season. —SN correspondents





McFadden might not be the best running back at Arkansas, much less in the draft.

## BRIAN BALDINGER



## The Heartbreak Hog?

I hate to burst the bubble of Darren McFadden and all the draftniks who think he's the second coming of Adrian Peterson, but he isn't. Honestly, you shouldn't even use both names in the same sentence.

Yes, McFadden ran for a ton of yards at Arkansas and was a two-time Heisman Trophy runner-up. But I've watched him on film and up close in the Cotton Bowl, and I've seen no special qualities that will make him an exceptional running back.

McFadden has breakaway speed, I'll give him that. And he's fearless putting hits on defenders. But that's part of his problem—he initiates contact. Unless you're built like Earl Campbell—a mountain of a man whose career was nevertheless shortened to eight seasons because of injuries—you won't last as a running back in the NFL by seeking contact.

A running back's most important quality is elusiveness. Barry Sanders, Emmitt Smith, Walter Payton—all the great ones had it. So do current stars such as Peterson and LaDainian Tomlinson. Their methods differed, but these backs had the key to turning a 2-yard gain into a 22-yard gain—and to surviving a brutal profession. They knew how to make tacklers miss. McFadden doesn't.

He also lacks the vision that is critical to finding open field. That's why he initiates contact—he can't

see the daylight to run to. He's a classic I-formation back who needs a fullback to lead the way. If the fullback gets caught in traffic, McFadden runs right up his back, rarely making the cut that would allow him to gain more yards.

I do believe an Arkansas running back should go in the first round of the draft. That would be Felix Jones, who, like McFadden, is a junior who is expected to declare for the draft. With his vision, moves and speed, Jones will be a better pro than McFadden.

When the Saints played at Chicago in Week 17, Pierre Thomas of New Orleans made his first NFL start. Thomas was an undrafted rookie out of Illinois, but you couldn't tell by watching him. He showed nifty moves, great vision and balance, power up the middle, soft hands and the ability to break tackles. He ran for 105 yards on 20 carries and caught 12 passes for another 121 yards. Reggie Bush has never had an NFL game like that.

Fact is, I'd take Thomas over McFadden, straight up. In a heartbeat.

*Brian Baldinger, an offensive lineman for 12 NFL seasons, can be heard on Sporting News Radio and seen on FOX Sports. Listen online at [radio.sportingnews.com](http://radio.sportingnews.com).*



## FILM ROOM By Greg Cosell

### The Pats' defense is more creative than complex

Believe it or not, the Patriots do have a defense. And it has benefited greatly from the dynamic play of Tom Brady and company. That is evident in one simple statistic: New England has defended the fewest number of plays in the league, an average of 58 per game (tied with Pittsburgh).

Let's start by dispelling a myth: The Patriots' defense is not complex in design, especially out of its base 3-4 on first and second downs. In fact, it is very simple, relying on the outstanding physical skills of the three down linemen and the consistent overall play of the linebackers. Play after play, the Patriots execute their defense better than anyone.

That doesn't mean you can't run on New England. Inside linebackers Tedy Bruschi and Junior Seau lack lateral quickness and range, and some teams have clearly had success (Colts, Ravens, Steelers).

The defense succeeds because coach Bill Belichick adjusts the scheme and personnel to match up to the specific strengths of a given offense. When the Patriots played the Colts in Week 9, Belichick concluded that tight end Dallas Clark, not Reggie Wayne, was the key player he



The Patriots don't mind putting Samuel in man coverage against any Colts receiver.

had to neutralize. Belichick used a nickel concept that featured cornerback Randall Gay in a safety position and safety Rodney Harrison essentially as a linebacker. Harrison usually lined up over Clark, often with safety help over the top. Clark was not a factor (two catches, 15 yards), and the Colts scored only two touchdowns.

The Patriots excel with their situational defense, whether they are in nickel or dime. Their predominant pressure packages are five-man schemes, with linebacker Mike Vrabel as the primary outside rusher.

What consistently stands out on film is how well their underneath defenders drop into coverage, taking away passing lanes for quarterbacks. It's often called the "swipe" technique, and the Patriots execute it with a great understanding of route combinations. In addition, Asante Samuel is one of the best anticipation corners in the league. He is outstanding reading the receiver through to the quarterback, then jumping routes in front of him. The Patriots are clearly comfortable singling up Samuel on the outside against anybody—including Wayne.

The Patriots are not a dominant shutdown defense. Their strength is their discipline and their ability to execute a team concept with efficiency and precision week after week.

*Greg Cosell of NFL Films analyzes coaching tape and is executive producer of State Farm NFL Matchup.*





Long would address one of the many needs that put Miami atop the draft.

## An early mock draft

For fans of 24 teams, the season is over and hope for the future lies in the draft. So let's look at how our War Room scouts think the first round might unfold, keeping in mind that underclassmen have until January 15 to declare their intentions.

**1. Dolphins:** Chris Long, DE, Virginia. Howie's son offers the size and versatility Bill Parcells desires in defensive linemen.

**2. Rams:** Glenn Dorsey, DT, LSU. If the Rams don't trade out of this spot, they'll take Dorsey to solidify their run defense.

**3. Raiders:** \*Darren McFadden, RB, Arkansas. Coach Lane Kiffin likes Justin Fargas a lot, but Oakland shouldn't pass on McFadden, a potential star.

**4. Falcons:** Brian Brohm, QB, Louisville. Bobby Petrino skipped town, but that doesn't mean Atlanta should pass on his quarterback at Louisville.

**5. Chiefs:** Matt Ryan, QB, Boston College. Either Ryan or Brohm would be a welcome addition to an offense in need of an overhaul.

**6. Jets:** Quentin Groves, DE/OLB, Auburn. The Jets have struggled to pressure quarterbacks; Groves has the quickness and athleticism to do it.

**7. Patriots (from 49ers):** \*Malcolm Jenkins, CB, Ohio State. Jenkins could replace Asante Samuel, a free agent who can't get the franchise tag again this year.

**8. Ravens:** \*Ryan Clady, OT, Boise State. With Jonathan Ogden likely retiring, the Ravens need a new man to protect their quarterback's blind side.

**9. Bengals:** Mike Jenkins, CB, South Florida. The Bengals could use a high-character guy who also is a big, physical, athletic corner.

**10. Saints:** Sedrick Ellis, DT, USC. Ellis is short but is an explosive and athletic playmaker who can blow up runs in the backfield.

**11. Bills:** Leodis McKelvin, CB, Troy. The Bills should pick the athletic and tough McKelvin to shore up a weak secondary.

**12. Broncos:** Jake Long, OT, Michigan. With Matt Lepsis retiring, Denver needs to add young talent to the offensive line.

**13. Panthers:** \*Calais Campbell, DE, Miami. Carolina should go with a defensive end to shore up an aging and ailing position.

**14. Bears:** Andre' Woodson, QB, Kentucky. The Bears have many concerns but none greater than quarterback.

**15. Lions:** Sam Baker, OT, USC. He would boost a line that struggled to protect Jon Kitna.

**16. Cardinals:** \*Ray Rice, RB, Rutgers. Edgerrin James is slowing down, and Rice would upgrade the rushing attack instantly.

**17. Vikings:** Early Doucet, WR, LSU. Sidney Rice and Aundrae Allison are complementary targets, but Doucet has No. 1 wideout potential.

**18. Texans:** \*Kenny Phillips, S, Miami. Houston has struggled to find quality safeties, and Phillips would make an immediate impact.

**19. Eagles:** Keith Rivers, OLB, USC. Rivers is a premier athlete at a position that has stymied Philadelphia in recent

seasons.

**20. Buccaneers:** DeJuan Tribble, CB, Boston College. Tribble would make a fine eventual replacement for the inconsistent Phillip Buchanon.

**21. Redskins:** Lawrence Jackson, DE, USC. Jackson could provide consistent pressure if the knee injury he suffered in the Rose Bowl isn't serious.

**22. Cowboys (from Browns):** Antoine Cason, CB, Arizona. Cason is smooth and would become a good starter opposite Terence Newman.

**23. Seahawks:** Jeff Otah, OT, Pittsburgh. He is raw and athletic—and one of the fastest-rising prospects in the draft.

**24. Steelers:** Tony Hills, OT, Texas. Pittsburgh must get more help up front to maintain its power running game.

**25. Titans:** Andre Caldwell, WR, Florida. Tennessee needs perimeter weapons to help Vince Young develop into an NFL-quality passer.

**26. Giants:** \*Felix Jones, RB, Arkansas. Jones split time at Arkansas with McFadden but is worthy of first-round consideration, too.

**27. Chargers:** King Dunlap, OT, Auburn. A.J. Smith has shown a willingness to gamble on elite athletes in the first round with the belief they will develop into elite players.

**28. Jaguars:** \*Derrick Harvey, DE, Florida. He would give the Jags an explosive speed rusher to complement their elite defensive tackles.

**29. Packers:** Chris Williams, OT, Vanderbilt. The Packers should grab the athletic and supersmart Williams to upgrade the line.

**30. 49ers (from Colts):** Kentwan Balmer, DT, North Carolina. Balmer, who did not become productive until his senior season, would be a gamble.

**31. Cowboys:** \*DeSean Jackson, WR, Cal. Jackson is a future star who would pair nicely with Patrick Crayton down the road.

**32. Patriots:** The pick was forfeited as part of the team's Spygate penalties.

\*Underclassman. Picks 3-5 subject to coin flip; selection order could be altered by playoff results; Super Bowl teams will have picks 31 and 32.



## INSIDE THE AFC

## Lepsis' retirement leaves Denver with some work to do up front

The retirement of Matt Lepsis means 2007 third-round pick Ryan Harris could be the starter at left tackle. After having back surgery last August, Harris has yet to play even a preseason game. But he was a quick study in the team's zone-blocking scheme last summer and made few mistakes before the injury. His footwork and quickness are a good fit in Denver's system, though he needs to learn the strengths and weaknesses of opposing ends. The team will likely need to add a veteran tackle as a sounding board, with RT Erik Pears also on the young side.



Without Lepsis, the Broncos may be scrambling to protect Jay Cutler's blind side.

**CORRESPONDENTS:** Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

**BALTIMORE** The team might consider switching LG Jason Brown and C Chris Chester because C Mike Flynn is contemplating retirement. Chester struggled at center, especially against bigger nose tackles, but he has quick feet and would be good at pulling or making blocks at the second level. Brown played center in college.

**BUFFALO** The team must decide whether it will grant backup QB J.P. Losman's wish to be traded. He offers little in trade value, but he's young and has exceptional tools. He would provide good insurance in case starter Trent Edwards got injured. Losman has one year left on his contract.

**CINCINNATI** Re-signing RT Stacy Andrews, who did an outstanding job starting 11 games in place of Willie Anderson (knee, foot), is a big priority. Andrews is a massive, physical presence with the versatility to play both guard spots.

**CLEVELAND** CB Brandon McDonald looks like a fifth-round steal. His footwork must improve, but he shows the speed and change of direction to cover top wideouts. He was the No. 4 corner as a rookie and must prove he can handle the pressure of a promotion.

**HOUSTON** The team must decide whether it wants to bring back No. 3 WR Andre Davis, who returned two kickoffs for touchdowns in the season finale. When Andre Johnson missed seven games with a knee injury, Davis became a quality starting target.

**INDIANAPOLIS** Another successful postseason push likely hinges on the run defense extending its solid play. The linebackers, led by Gary Brackett, are active and gang tackle. The defensive backs, led by Pro Bowl SS Bob Sanders, are fierce hitters.

**JACKSONVILLE** Rookie DT Derek Landri is playing a more prominent role because of John Henderson's leg problems. Landri (6-2, 288) lacks ideal size but adds explosion and a nonstop motor that help him pressure quarterbacks.

**KANSAS CITY** The Chiefs should re-sign reserve DE Jimmy Wilkerson, who is valuable off the bench because he can play all the line positions. His versatility is key because rookie DL Tank Tyler and Turk McBride didn't develop as quickly as the team had hoped.

**MIAMI** Just because Bill Parcells picked up RB Ricky Williams' option year doesn't mean Williams will make it to training camp. After Williams has recovered from a torn pectoral muscle, there is



a possibility he could be traded for a second-day draft pick.

**NEW ENGLAND** RB Laurence Maroney has gotten his game together at the right time. In particular, he has made strides reading plays as they happen. He's recognizing that if there's an unblocked cornerback near the goal line, he must keep his cuts tight inside the tackles.

**NEW YORK** LT D'Brickashaw Ferguson hasn't developed as quickly as the Jets had hoped, but they haven't lost confidence in him. He has improved his technique but needs to become more consistent. It would help him if the Jets acquired a veteran left guard to play next to Ferguson.

**OAKLAND** Coach Lane Kiffin says Michael Huff didn't become the consistent playmaker he envisioned at strong safety, so Huff will be one of the candidates at free safety in 2008. Huff should be a better fit at free safety, where he will be more free to roam and use his speed and athleticism.

**PITTSBURGH** With two sacks in the playoff loss to the Jaguars, OLB LaMarr Woodley all but solidified himself as a starter in 2008. He finished his rookie year with six sacks (including the playoff game) and showed the kind of power and explosiveness that could make him a star.

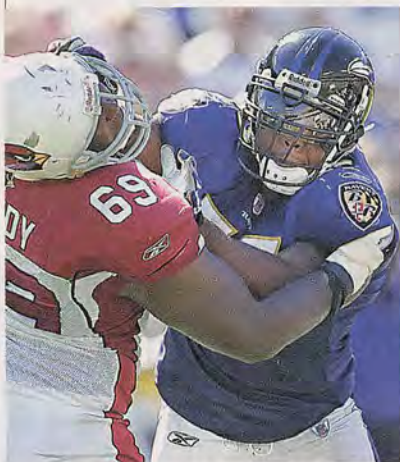
**SAN DIEGO** Vincent Jackson is seen as an underachiever by some because he has lots of talent but has yet to develop into a No. 1 receiver. He has some growing to do in running routes and fighting for balls, but he makes catches and takes hits. He continues to make steady improvement.

**TENNESSEE** Eugene Amano started the last three games and played at both guard spots and at center down the stretch. Amano is strong and uses his feet well in the trenches, and the team likes his versatility. He doesn't have long arms, but he has good technique and doesn't get rattled easily.

## FOCUS ON FREE-AGENT BUZZ

The Patriots could be in the market for as many as three linebackers if **Junior Seau** and **Tedy Bruschi** retire and **Rosevelt Colvin** isn't re-signed because of his high cap number. One target could be Ravens OLB/DE **Terrell Suggs** (6-3, 260), who would be a perfect fit in the old **Willie McGinest** outside 'backer role in the Pats' 3-4 scheme. ... The Jets figure to be active in the market. Pittsburgh's **Alan Faneca** would provide an immediate answer at left guard, but the team might look at the Colts' **Ryan Lilja**, who is five years younger than Faneca and could be signed at a cheaper price. With OLB **Victor Hobson** likely to leave, the Jets appear interested in the Ravens' Suggs. If the Jets decide not to renegotiate WR **Laveranues Coles'** contract and

trade him, they might pursue the Bears' **Bernard Berrian**, who would give them a defense-stretching wideout. ... Jacksonville's **Ernest Wilford** (6-4, 223) and Tennessee's **Justin Gage** (6-4, 212) are the kind of big, physical targets the Bills desperately need to complement top WR **Lee Evans**. Buffalo also needs a receiving tight end who can stretch the middle of the field. Philadelphia's **L.J. Smith** would be ideal, provided he can stay healthy. ... The Bengals need difference-makers along the defensive line. Titans DT **Albert Haynesworth** is a run-stuffer who would push the pile and complement young DT **Domata Peko**, a rugged, durable defender who is developing nicely. ... If RB **Jamal Lewis** plays hardball and demands a lengthy contract heavy with guaranteed money, the Browns could turn to the Chargers' **Michael Turner** (5-10, 237), another big back who can wear down defenses. ... The Raiders' top priorities are re-signing CB **Nnamdi Asomugha** and

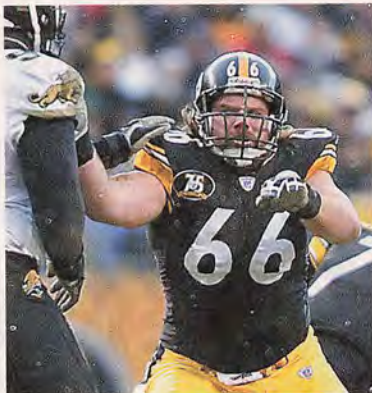


Many teams, including the Patriots and Jets, have their eyes on Suggs.

RB **Justin Fargas**. Asomugha is one of the game's top man-to-man defenders; look for the Raiders to do whatever it takes to keep him. Coach **Lane Kiffin** deems Fargas a better fit for his offense than **LaMont Jordan** or **Dominic Rhodes**. ... The Texans probably can't compete with the rest of the league for Patriots CB **Asante Samuel**, but Chargers CB **Drayton Florence** is an affordable option who would add speed and playmaking skills. The Texans also need a speed rusher to play on the left side, opposite **Mario Williams**. The Jaguars' **Bobby McCray** or the Titans' **Antwan Odom** would provide much-needed help.

## Offseason game plans

**STEELERS** The team must do something about the performance and depth of the offensive line. Unless Pro Bowl LG **Alan Faneca** comes down on his price, the Steelers won't retain him. Losing him would be a big blow, but don't rule out the possibility of the team signing a veteran replacement. Otherwise, **Chris Kemoeatu** is the top option to replace Faneca. One of the top priorities is re-signing QB **Ben Roethlisberger**, who has two years left on his contract.



The team doesn't want to lose Faneca but won't overpay for him.



The Titans must keep Haynesworth, the key cog in their improved defense.

**TITANS** The top priority should be finding playmakers at receiver and tight end to help QB **Vince Young** take the next step. The Titans need a speedster who can stretch the field. The team would like to use the tight end more but hasn't been able to because of underperformers like **Ben Troupe**, who will be replaced. On defense, the focus should be to re-sign DT **Albert Haynesworth**. The biggest question: Will the team welcome back CB **Pacman Jones** if he is reinstated by the NFL?



## INSIDE THE NFC

## Philly has a backup plan at tight end

Eagles TE Brent Celek stands to compete for a starting job if the team lets L.J. Smith leave. Coaches knew Celek had good hands but were surprised by his ability to get open downfield. Even if Smith returns, Celek will have an increased role next season. His development will allow the Eagles to employ more two-tight end formations.

**ARIZONA** J.J. Arrington likely won't ever be more than a third-down back with the Cardinals. Though the club could have used more explosiveness in the backfield, the coaches stuck with Edgerrin James and didn't give the speedy Arrington many carries.

**ATLANTA** RB Jerious Norwood is ready to take Warrick Dunn's starting job. Norwood is a big-play threat who can stretch defenses outside. He won't do much between the tackles, but he'll have to go there on occasion to keep defenses honest.

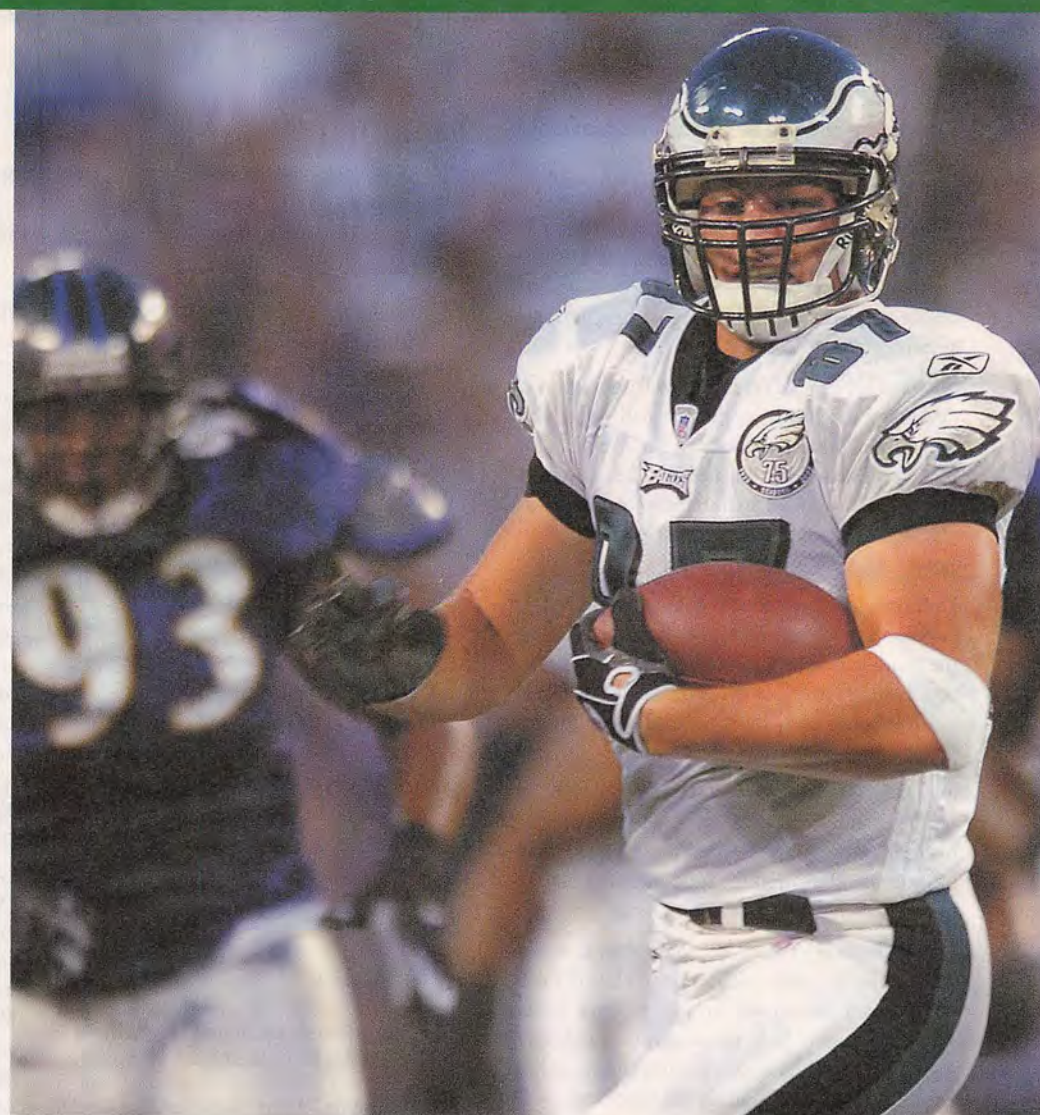
**CAROLINA** DT Kris Jenkins, 28, was the team's best defensive lineman this season. He was dominant against the run and put pressure on quarterbacks. But Jenkins could be elsewhere next season. If a team offers an early-round pick, the Panthers might trade Jenkins.

**CHICAGO** SS Brandon McGowan showed steady improvement this season. He is fearless in the box and plays with a reckless style that fits the defense but occasionally is fooled because of his inexperience.

**DALLAS** The Cowboys need SS Roy Williams to be a difference-maker in the playoffs. He remains a physical player who can unleash game-changing hits, but he must harness that aggressiveness so he's not fooled on QB Eli Manning's play-fakes.

**DETROIT** The firing of coordinator Mike Martz means the Lions will have a simpler offense, a more balanced attack and a more focused effort on getting the ball to the team's playmakers, most notably WRs Roy Williams and Calvin Johnson.

**GREEN BAY** Because rookie DT Justin Harrell is tall and angular, he doesn't always get his pads



low enough to hold up against double-teams. There's no reason he can't be an all-around player, but right now he's mostly a run stopper—and an average one at best.

**MINNESOTA** OLB Chad Greenway—who missed the 2006 season with a knee injury—showed he had not lost any speed and seemed able to understand the nuances of an NFL defense. He must learn to tackle better.

**NEW ORLEANS** TE Eric Johnson had an uneven season. He was a useful weapon as a receiver and was solid as a blocker, but he had a couple of bad games and was slowed by more of the nagging injuries that have plagued him throughout his career.

**NEW YORK** Even with the emergence of Aaron Ross and the solid play lately from Corey Webster, the team needs a top-flight cover corner. The Giants could pursue Asante Samuel (Patriots) or Marcus Trufant (Seahawks).

**ST. LOUIS** OLB Brandon Chillar (6-3, 253) has good size, rarely misses a tackle and has improved as a blitzer, but the Rams aren't expected to re-sign him. The team could pursue Cardinals free-agent LB Karlos Dansby.

**SAN FRANCISCO** Mike Nolan will return as the coach, but he no longer has the final say in personnel matters. That role belongs to Scot McCloughan, who was promoted to general manager after three years as Nolan's chief personnel adviser.

**SEATTLE** WR D.J. Hackett (6-2, 208) does not always run precise routes, but he uses his big body and sure hands to make crucial and tough catches. He has good body control and deceptive speed and quickness.

**TAMPA BAY** The team must find playmakers who can take advantage of QB Jeff Garcia's ability to throw accurately, even against the blitz. The Bucs are too reliant on WR Joey Galloway.

**WASHINGTON** Reed Doughty could be the permanent starter at strong safety. He's an aggressive tackler, quick enough to get around blocks and understands his assignments. He can get beaten physically but rarely makes mental mistakes.

**CORRESPONDENTS:** Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.





**Celek will see more playing time next season, especially if L.J. Smith leaves as a free agent.**

## FOCUS ON FREE-AGENT BUZZ

RB **Julius Jones** has no interest in returning to Dallas. He wants an opportunity to be the primary ballcarrier—not a guy who is the starter in name only. ... The 49ers tried to trade for Bears OLB **Lance Briggs** last October but couldn't come to an agreement with Chicago on compensation. The 49ers could renew their pursuit when Briggs hits the market. Briggs has the versatility and athleticism to play inside or outside in the 49ers' 3-4. He most likely would be the strongside inside linebacker, where the 49ers hope to get younger, faster and stronger. ... The Seahawks will look for a tight end. **L.J. Smith** is an option because he won't attract as much interest as some of the bigger names. The Seahawks also will try to add an offensive lineman. ... With LT **Travelle Wharton** and RT **Jordan Gross** both potential free agents, it's likely the Panthers will keep only one of them. Gross is the first priority, which means the team could have a hole at left tackle. The Panthers may consider moving Gross to the left side, a spot he has played in the past, and pursue a cheaper right tackle. ... Bears WR **Bernard Berrian** would upgrade the Eagles' receiving unit and give QB **Donovan McNabb** the downfield playmaker he lacked this season. Berrian could flourish alongside McNabb, who would rather burn a defense with the home run ball than short passes. Money could be an obstacle. Berrian stands to be the second-most pursued wide receiver behind **Randy Moss**. Berrian already turned down an offer from Chicago reportedly worth \$8 million guaranteed. Another obstacle is agent **Drew**



**The Cowboys' Jones isn't satisfied with a starting role—he wants a starring role.**

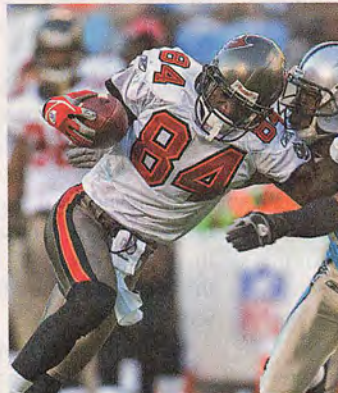
**Rosenhaus**, who helped orchestrate WR **Terrell Owens'** departure from Philadelphia and has long been at odds with the organization. ... The Lions are looking for starters at right tackle, end, middle linebacker and both cornerback positions. Don't be surprised if Detroit tries to make a big-money play for Bengals DE **Justin Smith**.

### Offseason game plans

**REDSKINS** The first thing the Redskins must do is assess the health of RG Randy Thomas and RT Jon Jansen. Both were lost for the season early, and their absences hurt the team all season. Both want to return. For a playoff team, the Redskins have a high number of positional issues. They need to bolster the cornerback, linebacker and safety positions. They could get by with LaRon Landry at free safety and Reed Doughty at strong safety. But at cornerback, Carlos Rogers is coming off major knee surgery and Shawn Springs might be released.



**Rogers' knee will be a concern going into next season.**



**Galloway won't be there forever—Tampa needs more playmakers.**

**BUCCANEERS** Considering Joey Galloway is 36 and Ike Hilliard is 31, look for the team to go after wide receivers. The flanker is the key player in the Bucs' scheme, and they have the cap space to make a run at the best available. But the Bucs probably will spread the wealth and sign several wideouts. The team is solid at cornerback right now but likely will look to add a player there anyway. Tampa could afford a top-level player, but considering secondary coach Raheem Morris' ability, it might take a chance on a young player who needs polish.



Brodeur's saving grace has kept the Devils on the right side of the win column since 1993.



After starting slowly while adjusting to a new coach, New Jersey has clawed its way to the top of the Atlantic Division.

## The Devils are better than you know

By Rich Chere

**T**hree weeks into the season you could've gotten better odds on Rangers bad boy Sean Avery winning the Lady Byng Trophy than on the Devils catching the Senators atop the Eastern Conference.

The Senators looked almost unbeatable, and the Devils were adjusting to a new coach and negotiating a season-opening nine-game road trip while their new arena was being completed.

The resulting 3-5-1 start made it look like the Prudential Center in Newark would come together long before the hockey team that lived there. Both were works in progress, which meant the Devils got to know new coach Brent Sutter's harsh side faster than they had expected.

"It was tough. When you have a new coach, you want to get off to a good start so you learn the good things about him and not the bad things right away," goaltender Martin Brodeur says, only half-jokingly.

"We found out how he hates losing. Our impression of him was, 'He's tough.' But when we started winning, it got easier. We can understand where he's coming from a lot better now."

The Devils have not yet caught the Senators, but there is reason to believe they are on their way to becoming the best team in the conference. They have the look of a team that can hold up over the long haul on the strength of a balanced, low-profile roster rather than a few stars.

Sure, they have Brodeur, but the days of Scott Stevens and Scott Niedermayer on the blue line are long gone, and general manager Lou Lamoriello's Devils have never featured offensive stars. The next time the Devils have a 100-point scorer will be the first time.

Sutter, who spent the past eight seasons in Alberta as owner, general manager and coach of Red Deer in the WHL, was one of the most aggressively pursued coaching candidates the past few years.

The Islanders, the team Sutter captained and helped win two Stanley Cups as a player, thought they might have the inside track. They didn't. Neither did the Flames, for whom brother Darryl serves as G.M.

Behind the scenes, Lamoriello had been talking to Sutter for years—waiting. Only now has it become apparent that Claude Julien, who coached the 2006-07 Devils to 49 wins and 107 points in his only season, was a caretaker.

Lamoriello got his man, but the Devils didn't respond to their new coach overnight. Sutter had some ideas and methods that did not work with the personnel he was given. He stripped Patrik Elias of his captaincy, eventually giving the "C" to Jamie Langenbrunner, and publicly criticized top players Brian Gionta and Brodeur.

Although Sutter planned to institute a more aggressive style, he has slowly come to terms with the Devils' defense-first tradition. That's still the way to win consistently.

"It's been a learning process for everyone," Brodeur says. "It was a tough start, but the last month has been good. We've found a style that both we like to play and he wants us to play. Everything is going a lot better."

Sutter admits he had some learning to do.

"There have been some hiccups," he says. "For the most part, the players have adjusted and I've adjusted. We haven't won every game, but the process is alike for everyone now."

Sutter enjoys playing mind games, poking and prodding players. He did it with kids in junior hockey, and he does it with NHLers.

"You're dealing with guys at this level instead of guys dreaming to get to this level, but I'm a guy



who believes in accountability and I don't care who it is," Sutter says.

Sutter is the single biggest reason for the Devils' success, and their 23-15-3 record suggests they could challenge for the Stanley Cup for the first time since 2003.

Other Eastern Conference teams signed big-name free agents in the offseason, but Lamoriello lost center Scott Gomez and defenseman Brian Rafalski and added only backup goalie Kevin Weekes, third-line forward Dainius Zubrus and defenseman Karel Rachunek. But if Gionta and Elias get going, the Devils will be as dangerous as anyone in the conference.

The calendar says 2008, but the Devils have the look of those 1995-2003 teams that won three Cups by playing team defense. And don't forget the Devils have the best goalie in NHL history—a debatable notion in some places but not in Newark.

Brodeur, 35, started the season slowly but now ranks among league leaders statistically while continuing to climb the all-time goaltender charts.

The Devils are climbing, too—and this is a team built for the long run. **SN**

*Rich Chere covers the Devils for the Newark Star-Ledger.*

For those who haven't been paying close attention, the Capitals are no longer languishing in the basement of the Southeast Division—and they're even threatening to get into the playoff chase. The Caps raised more than a few eyebrows by closing 2007 and opening 2008 with consecutive maulings of the Eastern Conference-leading Senators. The 8-6 and 6-3 wins lifted the Caps' record to within three games of .500—they're 3-0 against Ottawa and 11-6-4 since their 6-14-1 start—and they entered the week only seven points behind the division-leading Hurricanes. LW **Alexander Ovechkin**, who has 32 goals, should get some credit for the revival, but the real spark has been **Bruce Boudreau**, who took over for coach **Glen Hanlon** and has pushed the Capitals into a more aggressive, forechecking style. Also figuring

## >INSIDE DISH

into the resurgence has been the meshing of several newcomers—Cs **Michael Nylander**, **Nicklas Backstrom** and **Viktor Kozlov** and D **Tom Poti**—and some unexpected scoring from D **Mike Green** (11 goals).

> At the halfway point of the season, the most competitive division is the Atlantic, where every team is at least three games over .500 and first and last place are separated by only five points. Conceivably, all five clubs could qualify for the playoffs. Last season, the Atlantic sent four—the Flyers posted a league-worst 56 points in 2006-07. > Since the mid-November front office shakeup by Stars owner **Tom Hicks**, his team has posted a 16-9-1 record and is battling for first place in the Pacific Division. Apparently, the new general manager combo of **Brett Hull** and **Les Jackson** has made an impact.



Canada's hopes for a Stanley Cup winner could rest squarely on the Senators, Canucks and Canadiens. Follow the fortunes of those teams and 27 others at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

## speedreads

Not only was the NHL exposed to national audiences and a huge, enthusiastic crowd for its outdoor game at **Ralph Wilson Stadium**, it got an outcome the hockey gods must have scripted. It was a delightful spectacle, decided in a shootout, fittingly, by the league's brightest young star—**Sidney Crosby**. Instead of waiting four years between outdoor games, why not do it every New Year's Day—as a terrific alternative to the mind-numbing string of bowl games?

The Red Wings are on pace for 127 points. The last team to top that mark was Detroit (131) in 1995-96. The last team to come close to it was Detroit (124) in 2005-06. Caution to Red Wings fans: Neither of those teams won a Stanley Cup. —Ron Smith





The Rockets have problems, but Yao Ming isn't one of them.

# A little help for the big fella, please

By Stan McNeal

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**F**irst things first: It's not Yao Ming's fault. "Don't even go there," an executive from another team says.

There are numerous reasons why the Rockets have been one of the season's big disappointments, but their 7-6 center is not one. Even though his scoring and shooting are down, no longer does anyone accuse Yao of being too soft or too slow or too ... *whatever*. "With Shaq not what he once was, Yao is the most dominant big man in the league," the exec says.

Make no mistake, though: The Rockets have struggled. A six-game losing streak in November put them in a hole that they're just now emerging from, having climbed back to .500 last week. They began the week in 10th place in the West, two games out of the final playoff spot and needing to win 35 of their final 48 games to duplicate last season's 52-30 record.

The problems have been plentiful. First, a tough early schedule. The Rockets had played a conference-high 20 road games going into the week. The Spurs, meanwhile, had played 12. Tracy McGrady has missed a handful of games because of injury, this time because of a strained knee. In his three-

plus seasons with the Rockets, they are 15-34 when he doesn't play.

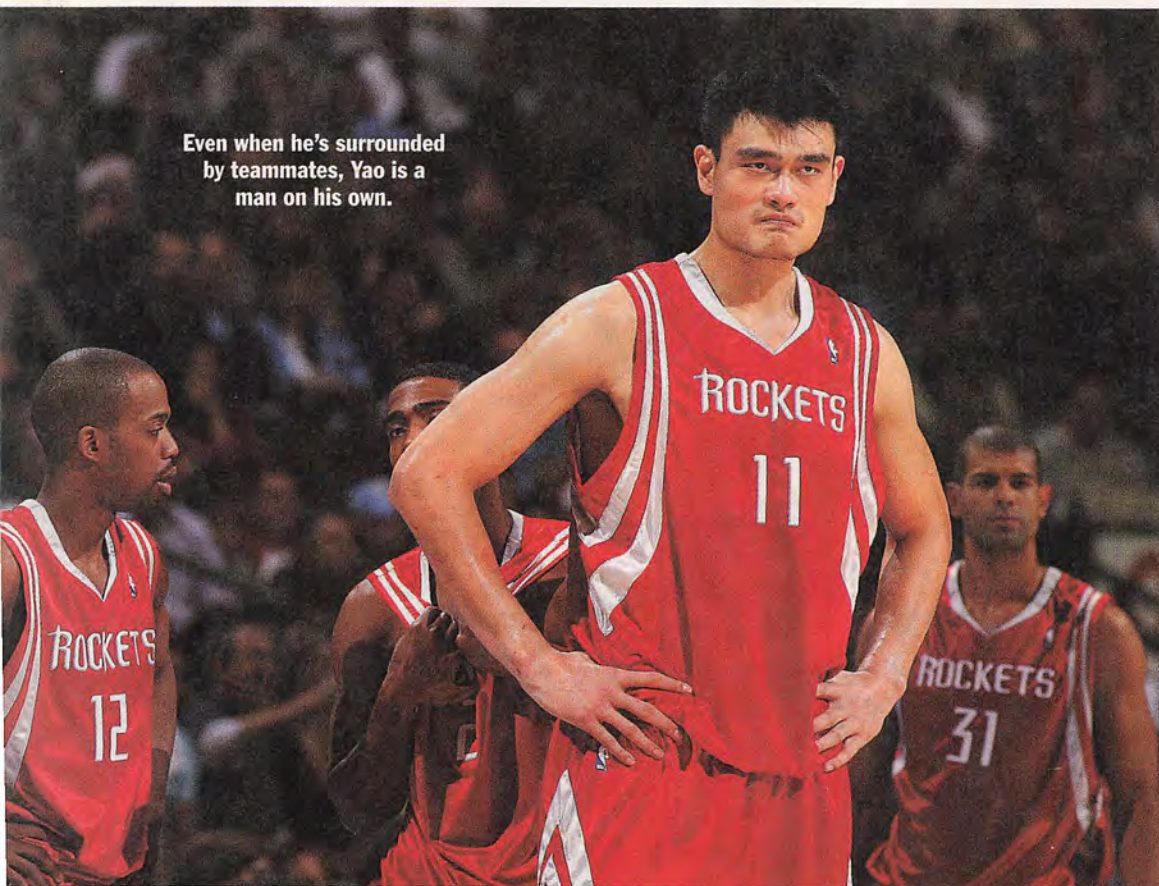
There also have been personnel issues. Starting point guard Rafer Alston is considered a knucklehead by many outside the organization. Sixth man Bonzi Wells is not a player you can depend on, and the return of reserve point guard Steve Francis has not helped on or off the court. "We're still developing our chemistry," says small forward Shane Battier. A scout puts it another way: "bad basketball karma."

Still, the No. 1 reason the Rockets have underachieved is basic—they haven't put the ball in the basket. Ironic, really, considering the franchise did

not retain coach Jeff Van Gundy because he was too defense-oriented. So far, the Rockets, 20th in scoring, have been less efficient under new coach Rick Adelman, who earned praise for directing a high-powered offense with the Kings, than they were under Van Gundy.

Until recently, the Rockets had only two players—guess who?—scoring in double figures. Their starting forwards, Battier and Chuck Hayes, average fewer than 12 points combined. With such an offensively inept supporting crew, no wonder Yao's numbers are down. Teams can double- and triple-team him because they know the Rockets don't have other options, especially when McGrady is out.

Even when he's surrounded by teammates, Yao is a man on his own.



**speed**  
**reads**

Advice to Scottie Pippen: If you really want to be a coach, put in some time as an assistant. Popping off is not going to help your chances.

Word is the Bucks are saying Andrew Bogut and Yi Jianlian are their only players who are not available. Why aren't they? If they're the future, the future doesn't look any better than a lot of first-round exits.

**Shane Battier**  
**says the Rockets**  
**are still developing**  
**their chemistry.**  
**A scout puts it**  
**another way:**  
**'bad basketball**  
**karma.'**



## Not-so-great expectations

At least the Rockets still have a slim chance to make something of their season. Other disappointments have become lost causes.

**Heat.** Even with Shaquille O'Neal on the decline and Dwyane Wade coming back from two offseason surgeries, no one figured the Heat would lead the East in losses. Well, they do, and about the only intrigue remaining is who will replace coach Pat Riley when he kicks himself back upstairs.

**Eddy Curry, Knicks.** Pick your Knick for this list, but none has fallen faster than the team's center. Isiah Thomas touted Curry for the All-Star team last season, when he averaged 19.5 points on 57.6 percent shooting. His scoring is down five points per game, his shooting average has dropped to 53.7 percent, and his rebounding is 24th among centers.

**Bulls.** Even if the emotional lift from changing coaches continues, digging out from that 2-10 start remains a long shot.

**Larry Hughes, Cavaliers.** At least he's healthy enough to play, but he's not playing very well. Hughes is shooting a career-low 32.7 percent and is averaging 9.4 points in a backup role. The Cavs would like more for his \$12 million-plus salary.

**Timberwolves.** When you're close to matching the pace for the worst record ever, you are a disappointment no matter the circumstances. At least Kevin McHale hasn't hurt his popularity in Boston.

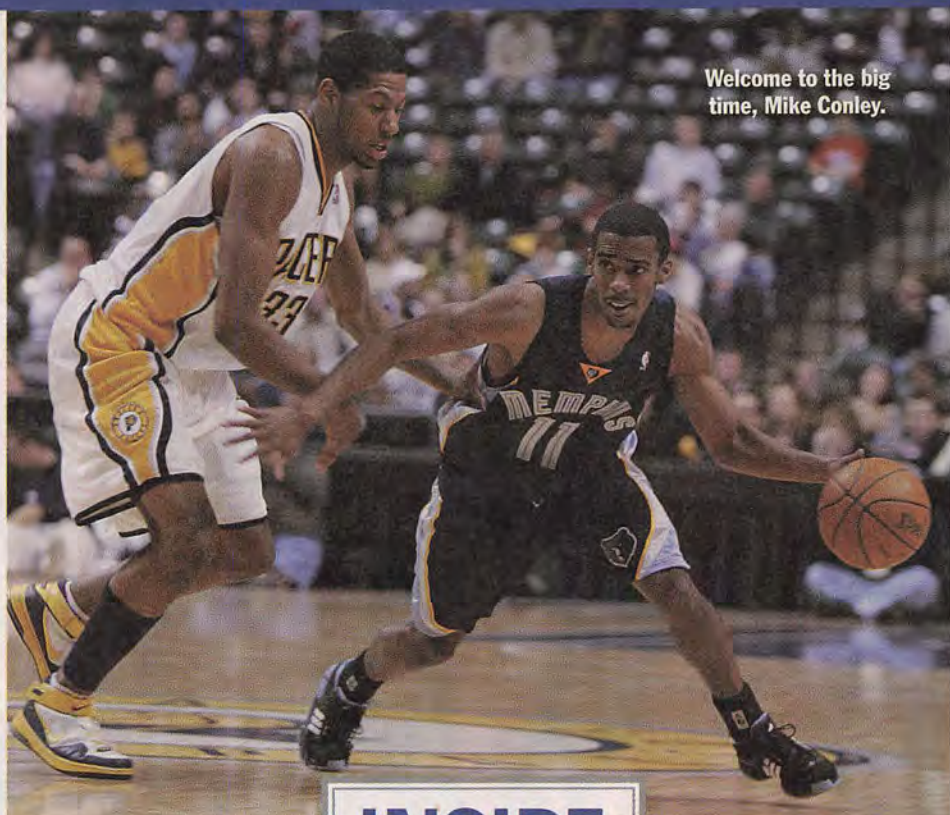
McGrady's return, while welcome, will present a new challenge. Only recently have the Rockets started running Adelman's offense more efficiently. Wells and Alston, benefiting from newfound freedom, scored in double figures in five consecutive games. So when McGrady comes back, does the movement continue or does everyone stand around and watch T-Mac?

"Don't change your game when I'm out there," McGrady says. "At the same time, when I'm not out there, they have to play this style because they don't have a guy on the perimeter who's going to attract much attention. I draw so much attention all they have to do is sit out there wide-open and knock down shots. Guys like that."

As long as they're making their shots, anyway. But when the shots don't fall and the movement stops, the Rockets won't take off.

If they don't, at least now you'll know whom not to blame. **SN**

**S** The Celtics have the league's best record, but does that mean the power in the NBA has officially shifted to the East? Find out Friday when Stan McNeal unveils his latest power poll at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



Welcome to the big time, Mike Conley.

## INSIDE DISH

Grizzlies rookie PG **Mike Conley** wasted no time taking advantage of a chance to play. Starting last week against the Pacers, Conley had eight assists and one turnover and led the Grizzlies

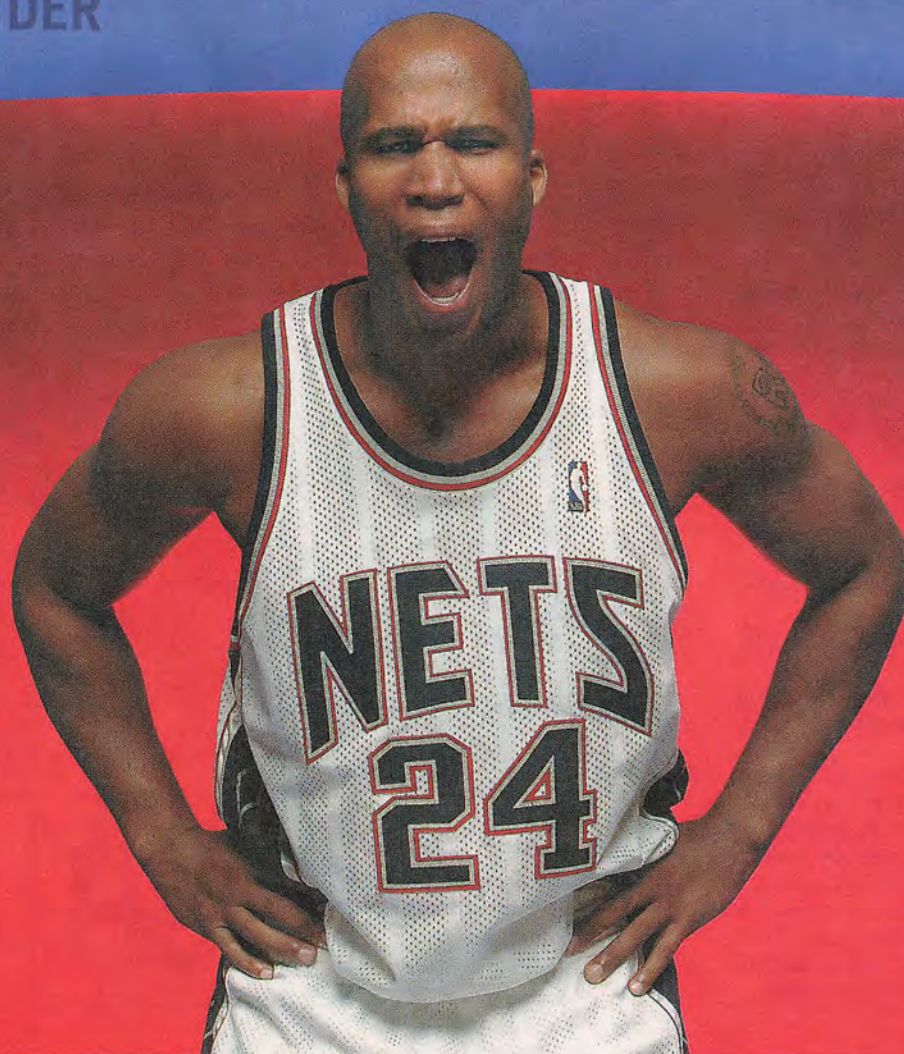
to a lopsided victory—the team's first in Indianapolis, Conley's hometown. Conley's emergence after a shoulder injury makes veteran PG **Damon Stoudamire** expendable, and numerous teams—including the Heat, Magic and Cavaliers—are in need of a quality point guard. One scout says Stoudamire, 34, still has enough game to be considered an upgrade over the Heat's **Jason Williams** and **Chris Quinn**.

➤ The Nets' hot streak coincided with inserting rookie PF **Sean Williams** and second-year C **Josh Boone** into the starting lineup for PF **Malik Allen** and C **Jason Collins**. The youngsters have brought needed athleticism to the floor. When C **Nenad Krstic** (knee) returns in another week or two, the Nets will go five deep at the power forward-center spots. ➤ Don't look at PG **Carlos Arroyo** as the long-term solution for the Magic. He moved into the starting lineup for the struggling **Jameer Nelson**, but Arroyo is known for his slow feet on defense—Pacers PG **Darrell Armstrong**, 39, motored past him repeatedly last week—and for making easy passes look difficult. ➤ New Bulls coach **Jim Boylan** made a positive change when he decided to bring SG **Ben Gordon** off the bench and start **Chris Duhon**. Gordon averaged 28.2 points on

51.2 percent shooting in his first six games as a sixth man. ➤ Free-agent PF **Chris Webber** may be waiting awhile if he wants to return to the Pistons. The team is content with its 15-man

roster the way it is. ➤ A player to watch as the trade deadline gets closer: Bulls PF **Tyrus Thomas**. Some scouts believe his attitude is an issue, and his playing time is dwindling by the day. ➤ Don't be surprised if Clippers C **Chris Kaman**'s 18.0 scoring average continues to decline. Because the Clips' outside shooting is so poor, opponents are sagging off on the perimeter and surrounding Kaman. In a five-game stretch that ended with a 1-for-10 night against the Hornets, Kaman shot 37.0 percent and averaged 15.2 points. ➤ At nine games under .500, the Bobcats aren't exactly tearing up the league. But the worst is yet to come. They will play a Western Conference team on the road for the first time when they visit New Orleans on January 18. That leaves two trips to the West and one to Texas still to come. ➤ Magic G.M. **Otis Smith** is still waiting for C **Dwight Howard**, who turned 22 last month, to gain weight. Smith knows Howard will not stay 268 pounds forever, but he isn't sure where the weight will end up. "All big men gain weight as they get older," says Smith, sitting on the Magic bench while watching rotund assistant **Patrick Ewing** work out players before a game. "Dwight just needs to be sure he doesn't gain it where Patrick has."





Q&amp;A

Nets SF  
Richard Jefferson

## Made in New Jersey

The latest in lean, mean scoring machines

*Nets forward Richard Jefferson is traveling in what he calls uncharted territory these days, having moved into the company of the league's top scorers. Jefferson began the week sixth in the league with a career-best 24.5 scoring average. And with the Nets on a roll—they had won seven of eight entering the week—he is enjoying the ride.*

**SN:** So how often do you find yourself checking the league leaders to make sure that's Richard Jefferson up there with the Kobes and LeBrons of the world?

**JEFFERSON:** I try not to do that because you start worrying about different things, who had a good game, who had a bad game. I have plenty of people telling me about it, so I get enough updates. Honestly, though, I try to stay away from it because there's nothing good that can come from it.

**SN:** You averaged 16.3 points last season when injuries limited you to 55 games. This year, you're

up more than eight points a game, the biggest increase among the top 10 scorers. Besides good health, what happened?

**JEFFERSON:** We have gone back to more of a movement offense like we ran when I first came into the league, and we're running a few less isolations. It's about 50-50. I've improved as a player, so when we went back to something I was familiar with, I took to it really quickly.

**SN:** Now that you're scoring like a star, are you getting calls from the refs like a star?

**JEFFERSON:** I'm getting more touches down the stretch in games, which is something I really haven't done consistently in my career. The referees know that. They might crack a joke with you once or twice, something like, "Hey, you know you're averaging this amount of points the last few games. It looks like the last time you had a bad game, I was reffing." For the most part, they like you to earn everything you get, but yes, you get the benefit of the doubt when

you're a person who constantly attacks. If there's a call that's 50-50, they take into account there's two people involved in the play, and you do get that.

**SN:** Can we expect to see you as a fixture among league scorers from here on?

**JEFFERSON:** I'm not a Michael Redd, Kobe Bryant or Allen Iverson who is going to get his 30 shots no matter what. If my shot's not falling, I'm not one of those guys to go out there and keep shooting 'til I get my numbers. We play a style that whoever is having a good night is going to get the touches. So every night I have to have the same focus, come out and try to be aggressive.

**SN:** On those nights when your shot isn't falling, how long does it take to realize that the numbers aren't going to happen?

**JEFFERSON:** When the final buzzer goes off. You never know when you might get hot. But when that buzzer goes off, you go, "Well, that was one of those nights. Let's move on." —Stan McNeal



Kyle Busch's style is a match for the moment.

## Toyota will love what Shrub does for it

By Mike Hembree

It only feels as if Kyle Busch has been around NASCAR for a decade or so. Actually, he's 22, and 2008 will be only his fourth full-time season.

He seems to have been a regular longer because he has been out front—literally and figuratively—for most of his brief career, both inside and outside Nextel Cup racing. If the connection with older brother Kurt, a quick NASCAR success story, weren't enough, Kyle showed up and made waves of his own, stirring the pot with little regard for the resulting collateral damage.

He did the bump-and-run. He bumped. He didn't run. He pushed his car into holes that were too small and too fleeting. He irritated veterans. He made enemies.

He heard the boos. Some were echoes from the difficult first years of big brother Kurt, seven years his senior (no surprise that Kyle picked up the Shrub nickname). Some boos Kyle earned on his own.

Last year Busch found himself in an odd spot. Hendrick Motorsports, his employer, had a full house of drivers and was adding one—a rather important one, in fact, in Dale Earnhardt Jr. The writing was on the pit wall. Because Hendrick could have only four teams, someone had to go. Clearly, superstars Jimmie Johnson and Jeff Gordon weren't leaving. Either Casey Mears or Busch was about to be folding fire-suits, and Mears, in only his first season with Hendrick, seemed an unlikely choice.

Every sign pointed to Busch, even though many drivers have survived on many teams with records much, much worse than his. In fact, he had performed well in a back burner role for Hendrick, toiling in the formidable shadows of Gordon and Johnson, trying to make his own way on a team loaded with star power.

Still, Busch had the reputation of a problem child. He could be hot and cold, fuzzy and fussy, nasty and nice—all in the same week. He made mistakes, learned lessons, then jumped in the quicksand again.

This resulted in an odd sort of Silly Season, one that happened fully within the Kyle Busch orbit. There was little surprise that he and Hendrick parted ways, but there also was no sense of shock when virtually every other team with a vacancy (or thoughts of one) lined up to talk with Busch.

**Busch likes to run on the ragged edge—and that's just what Toyota needs.**

Why? The kid can drive. It's as simple—and as complex—as that. Joe Gibbs Racing won the race.

Busch seems to delight in the search for the ragged edge, that largely unknown speed at each track that is the intersection of a heavy foot and a malleable brain. Sometimes, he steps over the ragged edge and onto the razor's edge. He gets cut or draws the blood of others.

It is this daring that ultimately makes great drivers, however, and Busch shows little inclination to change course.

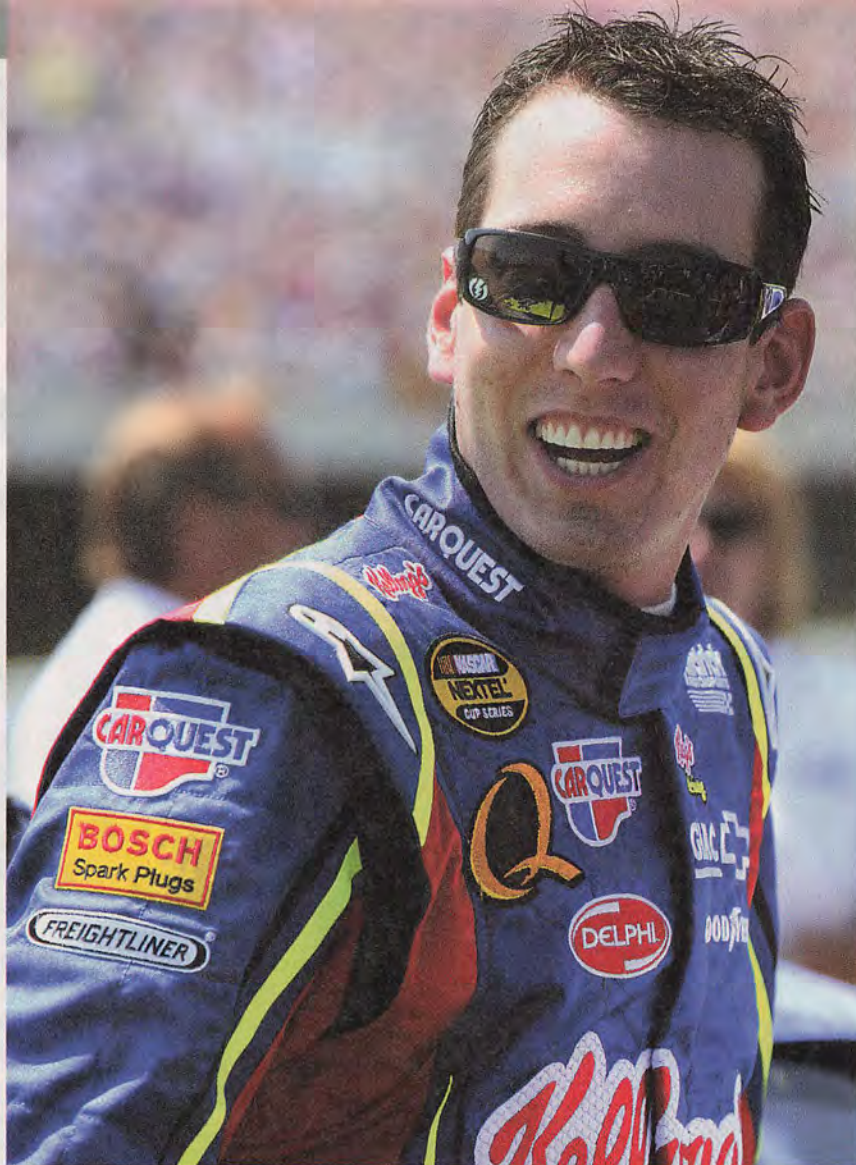
As fate would have it, Busch will find that his style matches perfectly the scenario of the moment as 2008 rolls in. JGR is swimming into an unknown sea of sorts with its switch to Toyota, which endured a miserable 2007, its maiden Cup season.

Toyota needs wins. Toyota needs a predator. Toyota needs to see the noses of its cars stuck in tight spots.

Toyota needs Kyle Busch.  
This should be fun.

SN

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Hembree at [scenedaily.com](http://scenedaily.com).



**Plenty of teams wanted Busch after Hendrick Motorsports let him go.**

**speedreads** The difference between how NFL fans react to greatness and how NASCAR fans react to greatness is striking. Nobody complains about the Patriots being boring because they win all the time. But the first time a NASCAR driver gets hot, fans get all cranky about the dullness of the races. Lecture over. Carry on.

.....  
If you're excited about testing at Daytona, you know you're a true NASCAR fan. Even the drivers are bored by it. Quoth Tony Stewart: "It's like watching paint dry." —Matt Crossman



Billy Beane traded Nick Swisher, but that doesn't mean it's time to close the book on *Moneyball*.

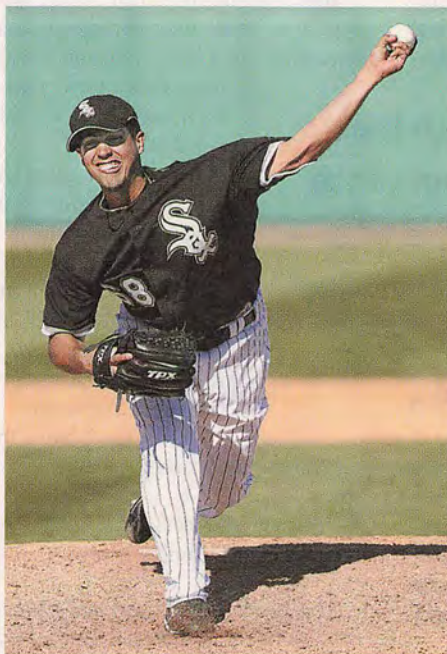
# Don't read too much into the A's offseason

By Sean Deveney

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**B**illy Beane is just a guy trying to run a baseball team. There are 29 others out there like him. But when it comes to Beane, it always seems to come back to adulation or disdain. Call it the curse of *Moneyball*. Thanks to that book, Beane can never simply act like any other general manager. Every trade, every signing, every draft pick—things G.M.s do—winds up in a *Moneyball* context.

Now, even the act of an old-fashioned, tear-down-and-rebuild project is being seen through the *Moneyball* lens. Maybe that's because, after trading ace Dan Haren last month, Beane last week traded Nick Swisher, a *Moneyball* idol, a player author Michael Lewis said Beane spoke of "in the needy tone of a man who has been restrained for too long from seeing his beloved." *Moneyball*-bashers are giddy. Recently, a former general manager (and a real old school guy) was



Beane, always a lightning rod around baseball, is retooling the A's this offseason by trading proven experience for electric prospects like Gonzalez.

delighting in Oakland's disappointing 76-86 finish last year. "I hope that this is the death of that *Moneyball* nonsense," he said.

That's just silly. The ideas put forth in the book are neither living nor dead. They're facts—observations on strike zone discipline, home runs, strikeouts and walks—that teams can choose to give however much attention they see fit. Many of those ideas have already become ingrained in the game. How many fans were well-versed in the notion of on-base plus slugging percentage before *Moneyball*? Now that many teams have adopted the principles that allowed Beane to find unappreciated bargain players for so long, those bargain players aren't unappreciated anymore. Thus, they're no longer bargains.

What the A's are doing now, though, has noth-



ing to do with *Moneyball*. It has everything to do with a limited payroll and a tired roster that needed to make way for youth. The A's had been playing what Beane calls "a shell game" over the past few years, bringing in aging sluggers like Frank Thomas and Mike Piazza to mask the lack of productive young stars. Piazza was a flop last year, and that probably helped lead Beane to say, "Enough."

Beane is doing what any general manager would do. Heck, it's what the A's did when they started their run of four straight playoff appearances in 2000, Beane's second year on the job. "What we need to do is get back to the point where we have a club that can go on a long, sustained run," Beane says, "which is how we started off this process if you go back to the 1999 season and that group of players. We need to get to that foundation."

To build that foundation, Beane is listening to offers of prospects for anyone on his roster—even Swisher, whom he had no intention of trading

when White Sox G.M. Kenny Williams first called. When Williams agreed to include his top two pitching prospects—lefty Gio Gonzalez and, the gem of the deal, Fautino De Los Santos, a 21-year-old with a power arm—plus enigmatic young outfielder Ryan Sweeney, Beane could not resist.

With the Swisher and Haren deals, Beane has collected nine prospects. He got three pitchers (including lefty Brett Anderson, a potential ace) from Arizona, plus one of baseball's best outfield prospects in Carlos Gonzalez. He plucked the two best pitchers from Chicago's farm system. And he's not done. Pitcher Joe Blanton, who won 14 games with the A's last season, has been a widely rumored trade target, and in parting with his "beloved" Swisher, Beane showed he's willing to trade anyone.

Which is just a smart baseball decision, plain and simple, one that proves nothing—either for or against—about the ideas Beane spoke of in *Moneyball*. **SN**

## speedreads

Someone, please, get Johan Santana from the Twins. The guy is in his prime, a lefty and a two-freakin'-time Cy Young award winner. All this talk about prospects, luxury tax fear and waiting 'til he's a free agent next winter is absurd. Do what you have to do to get him.

Hopefully, the Roger Clemens mess winds up where it should be—in the legal system. The public fight between Clemens and trainer Brian McNamee would mean a lot more if it were done under oath, in court. Not on *60 Minutes*.

Reading about how much agent Scott Boras has stumbled is tiring. Something tells me he'll get back on his feet.

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Sean Deveney answers the biggest questions around baseball in his mailbag every Friday at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

This was supposed to be an offseason in which the Mets shored up their starting rotation beyond RHPs **Pedro Martinez** and **John Maine** and LHP **Oliver Perez**. So far, all they've done is lose LHP **Tom Glavine**. The Mets are fringe contestants for Twins LHP **Johan Santana**, but they lack the organizational depth to land Santana unless they include SS **Jose Reyes**. Orioles LHP **Erik Bedard** and A's RHP **Joe Blanton** are possible trade targets. Failing that, the Mets will be left to sign a mediocre fill-in-the-gap starter, such as Phillies RHP **Kyle Lohse** or Diamondbacks RHP **Livan Hernandez**, or a rehabbing gamble like Phillies RHP **Freddy Garcia** or Angels RHP **Bartolo Colon**—or maybe one of both. G.M. **Omar Minaya** says the Mets are prepared to enter spring training with seven or eight potential starters. ➤ The Mariners will keep an eye on 2B **Jose Lopez**, who has been discussed in trade scenarios. Lopez, 23, was an All-Star in 2006 and was batting .295 on June 12 of last year. On June 13, Lopez learned his older brother had died in a motorcycle accident in Venezuela, but he was unable to return home for the funeral. The tragedy stuck with Lopez—he slumped, and his average wound up at .252. Manager **John McLaren** says Lopez lacked passion during his swoon. "He had a tragic loss with his brother last year, and that had something to do with it," McLaren says. "I want him to know there's no reason why he can't be con-

## INSIDE DISH

sistent over a whole season." ➤ The Cardinals took a low-risk gamble to bolster their rotation, signing RHP **Matt Clement** to a deal that has a base of \$1.5 million for 2008 and can run close to \$7 million with incentives. If Clement, who is coming off rotator cuff surgery, can return to innings-chewing form, the Cards may want to exercise their option on him for 2009. ➤ The Phillies acquired closer **Brad Lidge** because they thought the best starter available was RHP **Brett Myers**, their closer. A veteran scout doesn't think it will be difficult for Myers to return to the rotation. "Not with the stuff he has," says the scout. "He changes speeds on his fastballs so well, and he has that good curve. He has starter stuff. It's like when **Derek Lowe** went back to being a starter. He was always more of a starter than a closer." ➤ New Pirates manager **John Russell** noted that, in order to get erratic C **Ronny Paulino** more focused, he was told to "take him in the back, really jump him." Russell laughed off that suggestion, adding, "He's a big guy, probably fight back if you try to jump him." Paulino is 6-2, 245.

The M's are eager to see how Lopez will respond after enduring a trying—and tragic—2007.





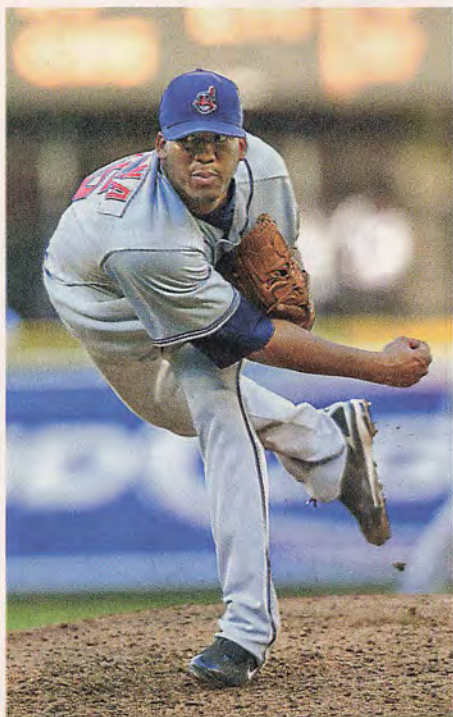
# A.L. FOCUS ON ROTATIONS

By Gerry Fraley

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**1 INDIANS** LHP C.C. Sabathia, RHP Fausto Carmona, RHP Jake Westbrook, RHP Paul Byrd, LHP Aaron Laffey

The biggest concern is whether Sabathia and Carmona have been scarred by their playoff implosions against Boston. This is a durable, sturdy group that should keep the bullpen fresh. LHPs Cliff Lee and Jeremy Sowers will push Laffey.



Carmona

**2 RED SOX** RHP Josh Beckett, RHP Curt Schilling, RHP Daisuke Matsuzaka, RHP Tim Lincecum, LHP Jon Lester

Matsuzaka faded in his first try at a longer season and Schilling and Lincecum are 41, so using RHP Clayton Kershaw in a form of a six-man rotation isn't so far-fetched.

**3 ANGELS** RHP John Lackey, RHP Kelvin Herrera, RHP Jered Weaver, RHP Jon Garland, LHP Joe Saunders

Garland, picked up from the White Sox, adds to the rotation's

innings-eating capacity. In fact, Garland, Lackey and Escobar ranked among the top 25 in innings in the A.L. last season. RHP Ervin Santana is valuable as another starting option, as a reliever or as trade bait.

**4 BLUE JAYS** RHP Roy Halladay, RHP A.J. Burnett, RHP Dustin McGowan, RHP Shaun Marcum, RHP Jesse Litsch

Halladay, Burnett and McGowan are ground-ball machines and will be big winners if new SS David Eckstein improves a mediocre infield defense.

**5 TIGERS** RHP Justin Verlander, RHP Jeremy Bonderman, LHP Dontrelle Willis, LHP Kenny Rogers, LHP Nate Robertson

Willis got a long-term deal even though scouts wondered if he was hurt last season when his velocity dropped with Florida. Bonderman (2-8, 7.38) and Rogers (0-4, 5.72) had poor second halves.



Matsuzaka is part of a Red Sox rotation that could boast as much quantity as it does quality.

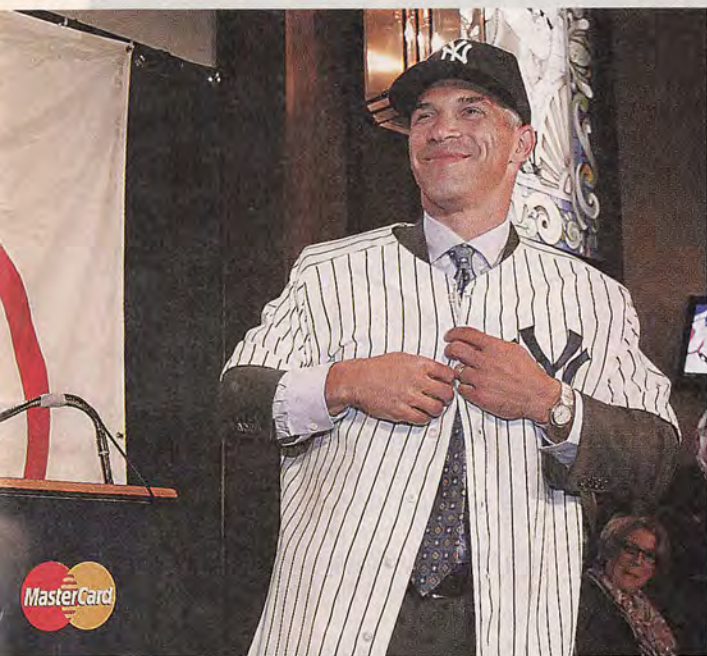


## Developing stories

**Will Joe Girardi be hard on Yankees starters?** Girardi had success as the Marlins' manager in 2006, but he pushed that team's young starting pitchers, and they all had problems in '07. As the Yankees' manager, Girardi will have several valuable young arms and a rookie pitching coach in Dave Eiland. Girardi must protect the Yankees' assets.

**Will the Rangers get a complete game?** The Rangers were the only American League club without a complete game last season and now have gone 191 games without one. Since May 15, 2005, the Rangers have two complete games in 449 starts. In the same span, Toronto's Roy Halladay has 13 complete games in 73 starts.

**Can Mel Stottlemyre rejuvenate the Mariners?** Stottlemyre returns to baseball as the M's pitching coach after a two-year absence to deal with a form of blood cancer. He takes on a big task: fixing a rotation that had the A.L.'s third-highest ERA (5.16) and turned in 34 starts of less than five innings last season. Stottlemyre speaks with the voice of experience and accomplishment—he has five World Series rings for his work with the Mets and Yankees.



## TOP5 Starters

**1. LHP Johan Santana, Twins.** He has won 15 or more games in four straight seasons. Santana's fastball and changeup look alike in delivery, but there is about a 15-mph difference between them.

**2. RHP Roy Halladay, Blue Jays.** Halladay, who is 93-38 the past six seasons, throws a pure power fastball, a cutter that bores in on lefthanders and a sharp knuckle curve.

**3. RHP Josh Beckett, Red Sox.** He showed significant growth last season by improving the command on his curveball and changeup and not letting his emotions get the better of him.

**4. LHP C.C. Sabathia, Indians.** He has improved command of his fastball and gets better movement on it when he keeps it in the low 90s. Sabathia's hard curveball is a quality second pitch.

**5. RHP John Lackey, Angels.** Hitters have difficulty picking up his pitches and often mistake his slider for his fastball, which leads to bad swings.

**In the conversation:** LHP Erik Bedard, Orioles; RHP Fausto Carmona, Indians; RHP Felix Hernandez, Mariners; RHP Justin Verlander, Tigers; RHP Chien-Ming Wang, Yankees.

**6 YANKEES** RHP Chien-Ming Wang, LHP Andy Pettitte, RHP Phil Hughes, RHP Joba Chamberlain, RHP Mike Mussina

The Yankees have not depended on two starters as young as Chamberlain (22) and Hughes (21) since the Dave Righetti-Mike Morgan duo in 1982. Wang's sinker ranks among the A.L.'s best pitches. Mussina is nearing the end.

**7 MARINERS** RHP Felix Hernandez, RHP Miguel Batista, RHP Carlos Silva, LHP Jarrod Washburn, RHP Brandon Morrow

Hernandez needs an off-speed pitch to neutralize lefthanders. Batista has late—and unpredictable—movement on his fastball. Adding the strike-throwing Silva increases the emphasis on pitching to contact.

**8 TWINS** LHP Johan Santana, LHP Francisco Liriano, RHP Scott Baker, RHP Kevin Slowey, RHP Boof Bonser

This group will be better than advertised if Santana isn't traded and if Liriano recovers completely from elbow surgery. Baker made great strides last season, posting a 3.44 ERA in the second half. Bonser's conditioning could be better.

**9 WHITE SOX** LHP Mark Buehrle, RHP Jose Contreras, RHP Javier Vazquez, LHP John Danks, RHP Gavin Floyd

Contreras and Vazquez could be traded because G.M. Kenny Williams wants to work in young arms such as RHPs Lance Broadway and Jack Egbert. Danks' pitches too often drift over the middle of the plate.

**10 RAYS** LHP Scott Kazmir, RHP James Shields, RHP Edwin Jackson, RHP Andy Sonnanstine, RHP Matt Garza

Rays starters led the A.L. with 7.7 strikeouts per nine innings last season. That primarily reflects Kazmir's power and Shields' exceptional changeup. Both should continue to improve. Jackson remains a riddle: talented but unproductive.

**11 ATHLETICS** RHP Joe Blanton, RHP Rich Harden, RHP Chad Gaudin, LHP Lenny DiNardo, RHP Justin Duchscherer

With the team rebuilding, Blanton is available. Harden would have tremendous value if he could stay healthy; he has pitched only 72½ innings over the past two seasons. Duchscherer is moving from the bullpen after an injury-plagued season.

**12 ROYALS** RHP Gil Meche, RHP Brian Bannister, RHP Zack Greinke, LHP Jorge De La Rosa, RHP Luke Hochevar

To keep a spot in the rotation, Hochevar, the No. 1 pick in the 2006 draft, must throw more strikes. With a 3.67 ERA in 216 innings, Meche looked good in the first year of his big contract (\$55 million for five years).

**13 ORIOLES** LHP Erik Bedard, RHP Jeremy Guthrie, LHP Adam Loewen, RHP Daniel Cabrera, LHP Brian Burres

Rick Kranitz is the latest pitching coach who will try to harness Cabrera's ability. An in-command Cabrera would combine with Bedard and Guthrie to form an effective top of the rotation.

**14 RANGERS** RHP Kevin Millwood, RHP Vicente Padilla, RHP Brandon McCarthy, LHP Kason Gabbard, RHP Josh Rupe

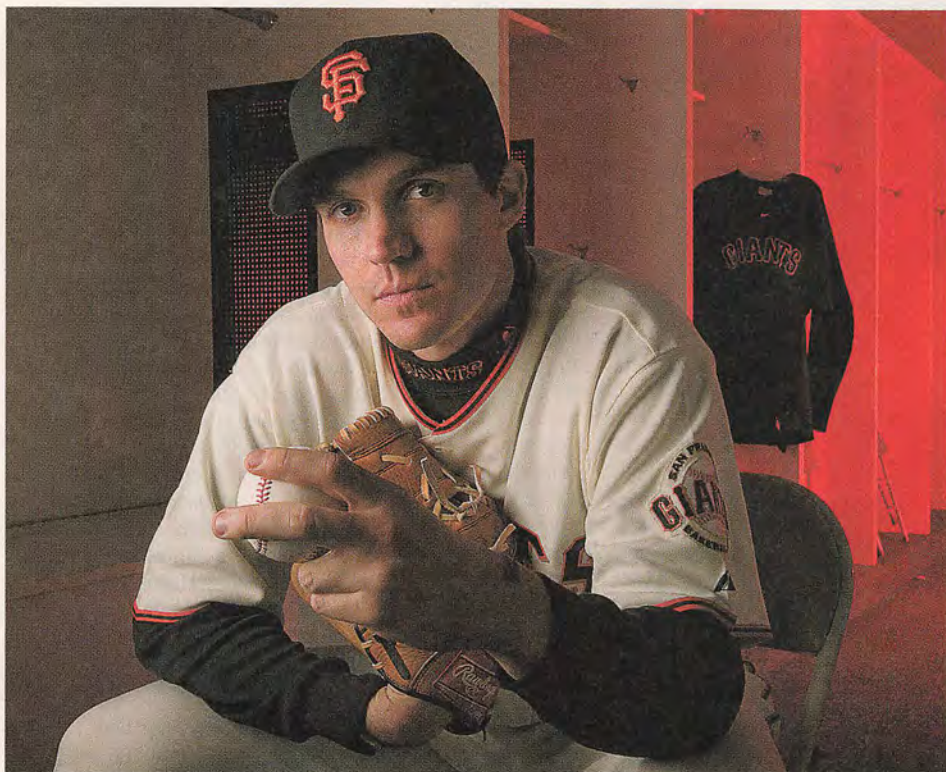
Millwood has been ineffective in the role of No. 1 starter in two seasons with the club. McCarthy must get more sink on his fastball. Some see Gabbard as a Jamie Moyer clone; others dismiss him as soft tosser with no deception.



# N.L. FOCUS ON ROTATIONS

By Gerry Fraley

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**1 DIAMONDBACKS** RHP Brandon Webb, RHP Dan Haren, LHP Doug Davis, LHP Randy Johnson, RHP Micah Owings.

Haren joins Webb to form a potent 1-2 punch. Both get a lot of ground balls and are good for 215-plus innings. If Johnson, 44, returns strong after back surgery, the rotation should be dominant.

**2 PADRES** RHP Jake Peavy, RHP Chris Young, RHP Greg Maddux, LHP Randy Wolf, RHP Clay Hensley.

Young (.192 opponents' batting average) was the N.L.'s hardest starter to hit for a second straight season. Wolf has not pitched more than 140 innings since 2003.

**3 DODGERS** RHP Brad Penny, RHP Derek Lowe, RHP Hiroki Kuroda, RHP Chad Billingsley, RHP Jason Schmidt.

Kuroda was a workhorse in Japan. Penny ranked third in the N.L. with a 3.03 ERA last season. Schmidt won once in six starts last season

before undergoing shoulder surgery.

**4 CUBS** RHP Carlos Zambrano, LHP Ted Lilly, LHP Rich Hill, RHP Jason Marquis, RHP Ryan Dempster.

Lilly, coming off his best season, and Hill give the team two tough lefties to follow Zambrano. Dempster goes from closing to starting, a role in which he has had modest success.

**5 GIANTS** RHP Matt Cain, LHP Barry Zito, LHP Noah Lowry, RHP Tim Lincecum, RHP Kevin Correia.

Cain was just 7-16 last season but ranked 10th in the N.L. in ERA and fifth in opponents' batting average. N.L. hitters laid off Zito's curveball.

**6 ROCKIES** LHP Jeff Francis, RHP Ubaldo Jimenez, RHP Aaron Cook, RHP Jason Hirsh, RHP Kip Wells.

Francis went 16-5 after May 2. Jimenez's pitches range from a 99-mph fastball to a 72-mph changeup. Cook's superb sinker hasn't resulted in a lot of wins.

**The Giants' rotation will get a big boost if Zito can bounce back from a rough N.L. debut.**

**7 BREWERS** RHP Ben Sheets, RHP Jeff Suppan, RHP Yovani Gallardo, LHP Chris Capuano, RHP Carlos Villanueva.

Sheets made only five starts after July 15. Gallardo showed remarkable poise for a 21-year-old, going 4-1 with a 1.58 ERA in his last six starts.

**8 BRAVES** RHP John Smoltz, RHP Tim Hudson, LHP Tom Glavine, LHP Chuck James, LHP Mike Hampton.

Smoltz is 44-24 since returning from the bullpen in 2005. Hudson is coming off his best season in the N.L. Glavine went 28-15 in his last two seasons with the Mets.

**9 METS** RHP Pedro Martinez, RHP John Maine, LHP Oliver Perez, RHP Orlando Hernandez, RHP Mike Pelfrey.

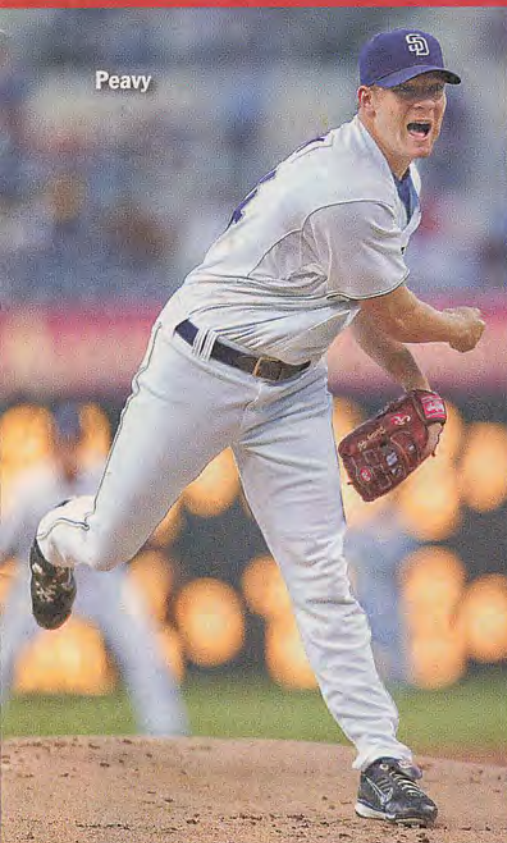
Martinez and Hernandez are nearing the end. Maine and Pelfrey are still learning. Perez can be very good or very bad. His frequent walks lull fielders to sleep.



FROM LEFT: ALBERT DICKSON / SN; JAY DROWNS / SN (2)



Peavy



## Developing stories

**Is the West by far the best?** Why, yes. The Padres' Jake Peavy, the D-backs' Brandon Webb and the Dodgers' Brad Penny finished 1-2-3 in the N.L. CyYoung race. Four West clubs ranked among the league's top six in ERA. Colorado finally has a true ace in Jeff Francis and also boasts a superb young starter in Ubaldo Jimenez. And joining the division are 2007 A.L. All-Star starter Dan Haren, who was traded to Arizona, and Japanese star Hiroki Kuroda, who signed with the Dodgers.

**Does Pedro Martinez have much left?** He was effective in five late-season starts after coming back from rotator cuff surgery, but it is wishful thinking for the Mets to count on a seasonlong boost from Martinez. He is 36 and has pitched only 160⅓ innings over the past two seasons.

**Can Pittsburgh surprise anyone?** The Pirates have four starters 26 or younger: Tom Gorzelanny, Ian Snell, Zach Duke and Paul Maholm. Each has shown glimpses of top-flight ability, only to be dragged down by the mess that has been the Pirates. If new manager John Russell and pitching coach Jeff Andrews can get the best from these young starters, the Pirates could contend in the Central.

**10 PHILLIES** LHP Cole Hamels, RHP Brett Myers, LHP Jamie Moyer, RHP Kyle Kendrick, RHP Adam Eaton.

Hamels, a changeup master, is close to becoming a true ace. Myers returns to the rotation after a short run at closer. As a rookie, Kendrick showed a knack for pitching out of trouble.

**11 PIRATES** LHP Tom Gorzelanny, RHP Ian Snell, LHP Paul Maholm, LHP Zach Duke, RHP Matt Morris.

New pitching coach Jeff Andrews worked with every starter except for Morris in the minors. Duke and Maholm need a consistent off-speed pitch to counter righthanded hitters.

**12 REDS** RHP Aaron Harang, RHP Bronson Arroyo, RHP Matt Belisle, RHP Homer Bailey, RHP Edinson Volquez.

Arroyo had 22 quality starts but won just nine games because of poor run support. Bailey and Volquez have electric arms but must improve command of their fastballs.

**13 CARDINALS** RHP Adam Wainwright, RHP Braden Loper, RHP Joel Pineiro, RHP Matt Clement, RHP Todd Wellemeier.

Wainwright is a nice starting point, and the team hopes to have LHP Mark Mulder early in the season and RHP Chris Carpenter for part of the second half. What does Clement, 33, have left after missing last season because of shoulder surgery?

**14 ASTROS** RHP Roy Oswalt, RHP Brandon Backe, LHP Wandy Rodriguez, RHP Woody Williams, RHP Chris Sampson.

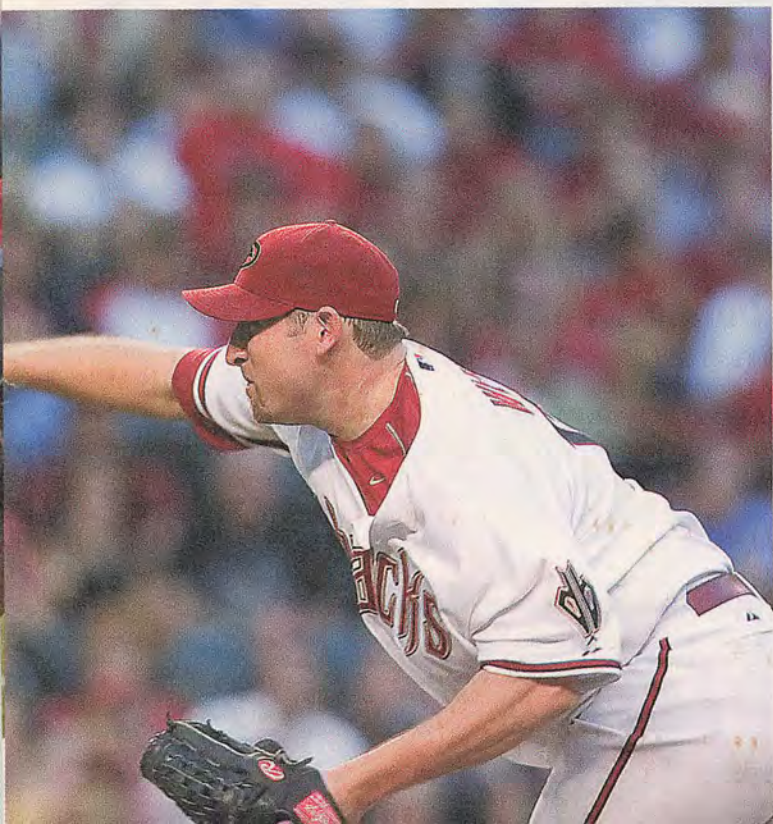
Oswalt gives the team a good chance every fifth day. Hold on after that. Rodriguez has potential if he improves command of his fastball.

**15 NATIONALS** RHP Shawn Hill, LHP Matt Chico, RHP Jay Bergmann, RHP John Patterson, RHP Tim Redding.

Hill, whose sinker shatters the bats of right-handed hitters, has emerged as a potential front-end starter. The rotation likely will be churned all season as prospects such as LHP Ross Detwiler get auditions.

**16 MARLINS** LHP Scott Olsen, RHP Sergio Mitre, LHP Andrew Miller, RHP Anibal Sanchez, RHP Ricky Nolasco.

Olsen has had maturity issues, but he has a powerful fastball-slider combination. Mitre, who will turn 27 next month, is the old man of the group. Miller needs a better changeup to go with a mid-90s fastball.



## TOP5 Starters

**1. RHP Jake Peavy, Padres.** Peavy, who led the N.L. in wins, ERA and strikeouts last season, has excellent command of his two- and four-seam fastballs and hard slider.

**2. RHP Brandon Webb, Diamondbacks.** This extreme sinkerballer gets more than two-thirds of his outs on ground balls. Webb's wins have gone from 14 to 16 to 18 the past three years.

**3. RHP Carlos Zambrano, Cubs.** He works up with a 96-mph fastball, and he works down with a bowling ball sinker. His command and self-control can be issues.

**4. RHP Aaron Harang, Reds.** Better conditioning has allowed him to maintain power deeper into games. The Reds went 24-10 in his starts and 48-80 in all other games last season.

**5. RHP Roy Oswalt, Astros.** Despite his 6-0, 185-pound frame, he generates a 96-mph fastball, then breaks off a sharp curveball in the low 70s.

**In the conversation:** LHP Jeff Francis, Rockies; LHP Cole Hamels, Phillies; RHP Brad Penny, Dodgers; RHP John Smoltz, Braves; RHP Chris Young, Padres.





## EXPOSURE

### Able to leap tall Titans in a single bound ...

Of course, it helps when those Titans are mixed up in a big ol' pile of shoulder pads, helmets and Chargers. LaDainian Tomlinson, San Diego's Superman, scored this fourth quarter touchdown to help the Chargers secure their 17-6 victory against Tennessee in the first round of the AFC playoffs.

SPORTING NEWS (ISSN 0038-805X) January 14, 2008, Vol. 232, No. 2 is published weekly, except for one week in July and December by SPORTING NEWS, a division of American City Business Journals, Inc., 14500 S. Outer 40, Ste. 300, Chesterfield, MO 63017-5781. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. For subscription service write to SPORTING NEWS, P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. Subscription price is \$78.00 for 50 issues. Subscribers in Canada add \$62.50 per 50 issues. Air Mail rates available on request. Allow six weeks for change of address. Postmaster: Send address changes to SPORTING NEWS, P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 51573, Boulder, CO 80322-1573. SPORTING NEWS assumes no responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts, color negatives or transparencies. COPYRIGHT © 2008 American City Business Journals, Inc., PRINTED IN U.S.A. CANADA GST REGISTRATION NUMBER R-124853730. Publications Mail Agreement Number 40018968. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: BleuChip International, P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. SPORTING NEWS is a federally registered trademark of American City Business Journals, Inc., ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED.

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